CHINA
REPORT

Volume No. 143 April 2025

CULTURE

Cracking the Case: *Detective Chinatown* helmer on film success

ECONOMY

Green Steel: Can the EV sector push a hydrogen revolution?

INNOVATION NATION

Two sessions drives growth through tech, trade and trust

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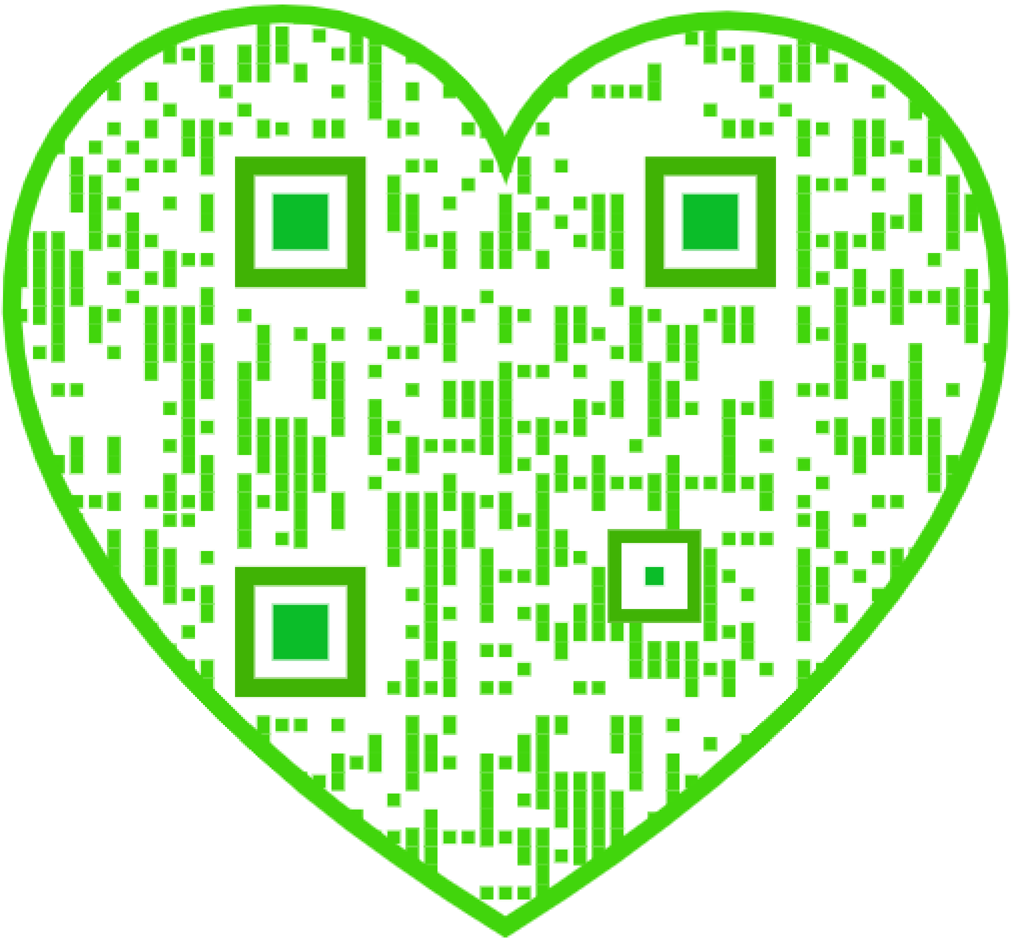

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World Tourism Organization

Around the world tourism grows every single year. Tourism creates job opportunities, empowers communities and improves livelihoods.

Tourism is part of the economic value chain, from infrastructure and communication to food production and transport.

Tourism goes far beyond tourism alone! Delivering on its huge potential is the task of the **World Tourism Organization (UNWTO),** the UN's special agency to promote tourism's many benefits on societies and the economy.

unwto.org

China needs to take multifaceted approach to promoting the development of lightweight AI while mitigating risks

For years, the development and deployment of advanced AI models were dominated by a few tech giants and well-funded institutions. The exorbitant costs of training and running these models have create a high barrier to entry, sidelining smaller enterprises and individuals. In reducing operational costs by 90 percent, DeepSeek-R1, released by a Chinese startup in January, has substantially lowered this barrier. Hailed as the "DeepSeek Moment," it has brought AI out of elite research labs into the hands of the masses.

> It marks the dawn of a new era known as "lightweight AI," where AI is accessible and affordable to everyone, and it holds the potential to reshape the global AI industry ecosystem

The birth of DeepSeek-R1 is comparable to the transition from mainframes to microcomputers and personal computers. It marks the dawn of a new era known as "lightweight AI," where AI is accessible and affordable to everyone, and holds the potential to reshape the global AI industry ecosystem.

By adopting an open-source strategy akin to Android and making the model's architecture and toolchain freely available, this open-source approach challenges the monopolistic tendencies of existing AI firms such as OpenAI and substantially increases creativity and collaboration. Thousands of industry-specific applications have already emerged, tailored to sectors such as healthcare, agriculture and manufacturing. As the open-source approach increases the compatibility of AI models, it will drive the market share of domestic chips. AI competition will shift from a battle over technology to ecosystem development.

DeepSeek-R1 represents a paradigm shift in how AI can be integrated into industry and society. In manufacturing, companies are transitioning from purchasing software to subscribing to AI-driven services, enabling even small producers to customise solutions without coding expertise. In consumer markets, AI assistants are taking over tasks such as medical consultation and financial planning, shifting the focus from product sales to service-based revenue models.

However, the widespread adoption of lightweight AI also raises significant ethical and societal concerns. AI trained on biased data could perpetuate or exacerbate those biases. An algorithm that systematically excludes certain demographic groups could deepen social divisions. The misuse of AI technologies such as deepfakes also threaten to undermine public trust, as they can be weaponised to spread misinformation or manipulate public opinion. Furthermore, increasing reliance on AI could make people become overly dependent, lessening people's critical thinking skills and autonomy over time.

China needs to adopt a multifaceted approach. First, at the policy level, the government should bring open-source contributions into the national innovation strategy. The government can set up AI open-source funds focusing on advancing critical foundational technologies such as underlying frameworks and compiler toolchains. At the enterprise level, efforts should be made to promote the development and self-sufficiency of the entire "chip-framework-application" industrial chain.

Second, the government should innovate regulatory mechanisms across multiple dimensions including data activation and risk control. For example, a "data bank" system can be deployed to unlock the value of medical, transportation and other data while protecting privacy.

Finally, on a global scale, the rise of lightweight AI presents an opportunity to redefine international collaboration. By promoting open standards and inclusive practices, countries can join hands to ensure the benefits of AI are shared equitably. Initiatives like the "Digital Silk Road" could foster cooperation and learning, helping to bridge the gap between developed and developing nations.★

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The Way Forward

ChinaReport rounds up the new economic, trade and foreign policies, strategies and proposals revealed at this year's two sessions

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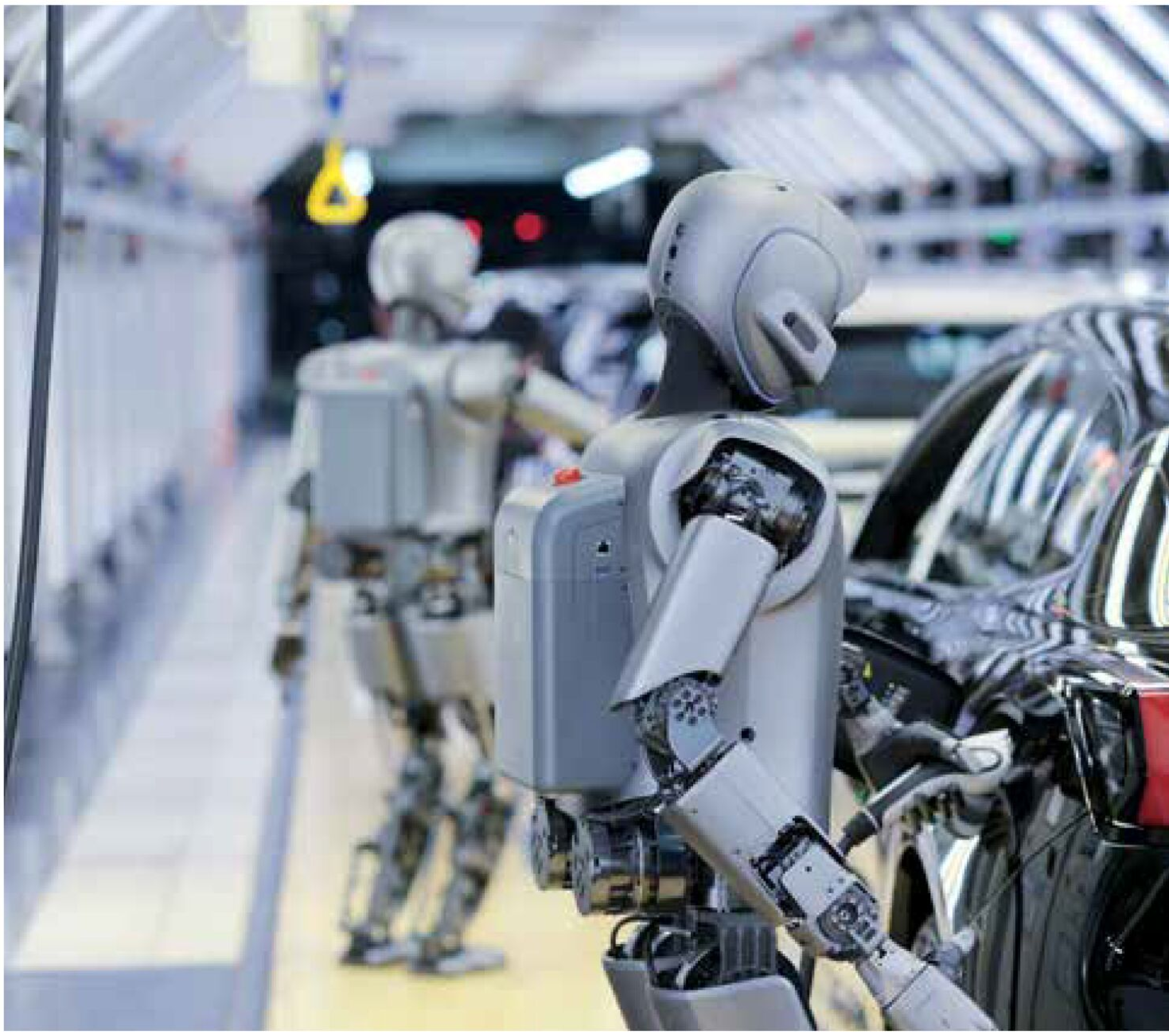
1. Humanoid robots perform tasks in the world's first large-scale, multi-task collaborating training session at a 5G smart factory of Chinese automaker ZEEKR, March 1, 2025, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province (Photo by VCG)

2. A tram carries tourists through the atrium of Super Wenheyou Night Market Complex, Changsha, Hunan Province, February 17, 2025. The market is notable for its immersive multi-storey 80s-themed restaurants, resembling the former Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong (Photo by VCG)

3. A man takes a selfie with a Formula 1 race car, North Bund International Passenger Centre, Shanghai, March 17, 2025. The 2025 Chinese Grand Prix was held from March 21-23 at the Shanghai International Circuit (Photo by VCG)

4. Xi'an Western Airport Museum, the world's first museum in an airport, officially opens on February 20, 2025. The museum is located on the 4th floor of Terminal 5 of Xi'an Xianyang International Airport, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, and built in Tang Dynasty (618-907) achitectural style (Photo by VCG)

5. Dujiangyan Zhongshuge bookshop, located in Dujiangyan, Sichuan Province, attracts visitors with its stunning architectural features, March 5, 2025 (Photo by VCG)



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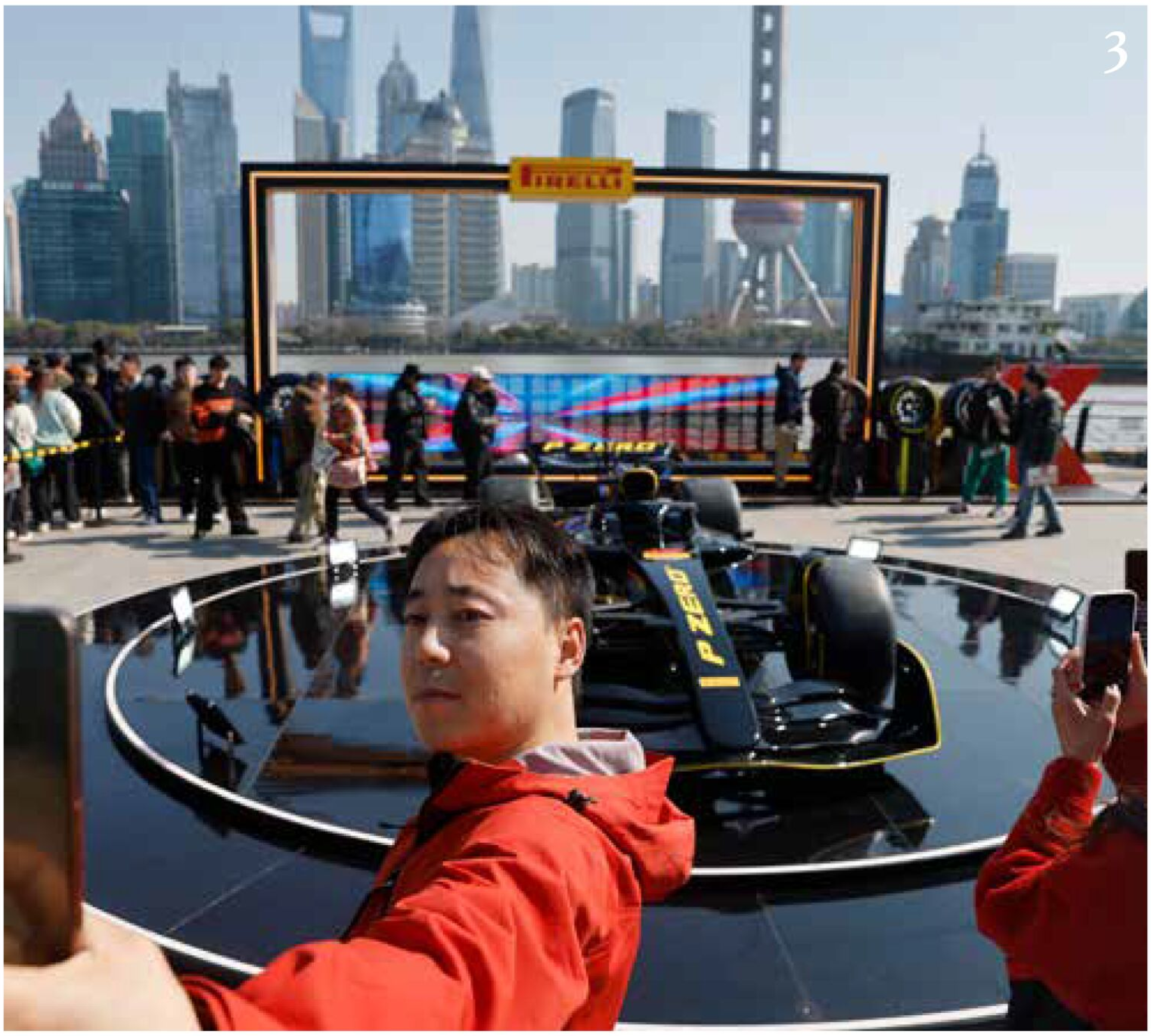

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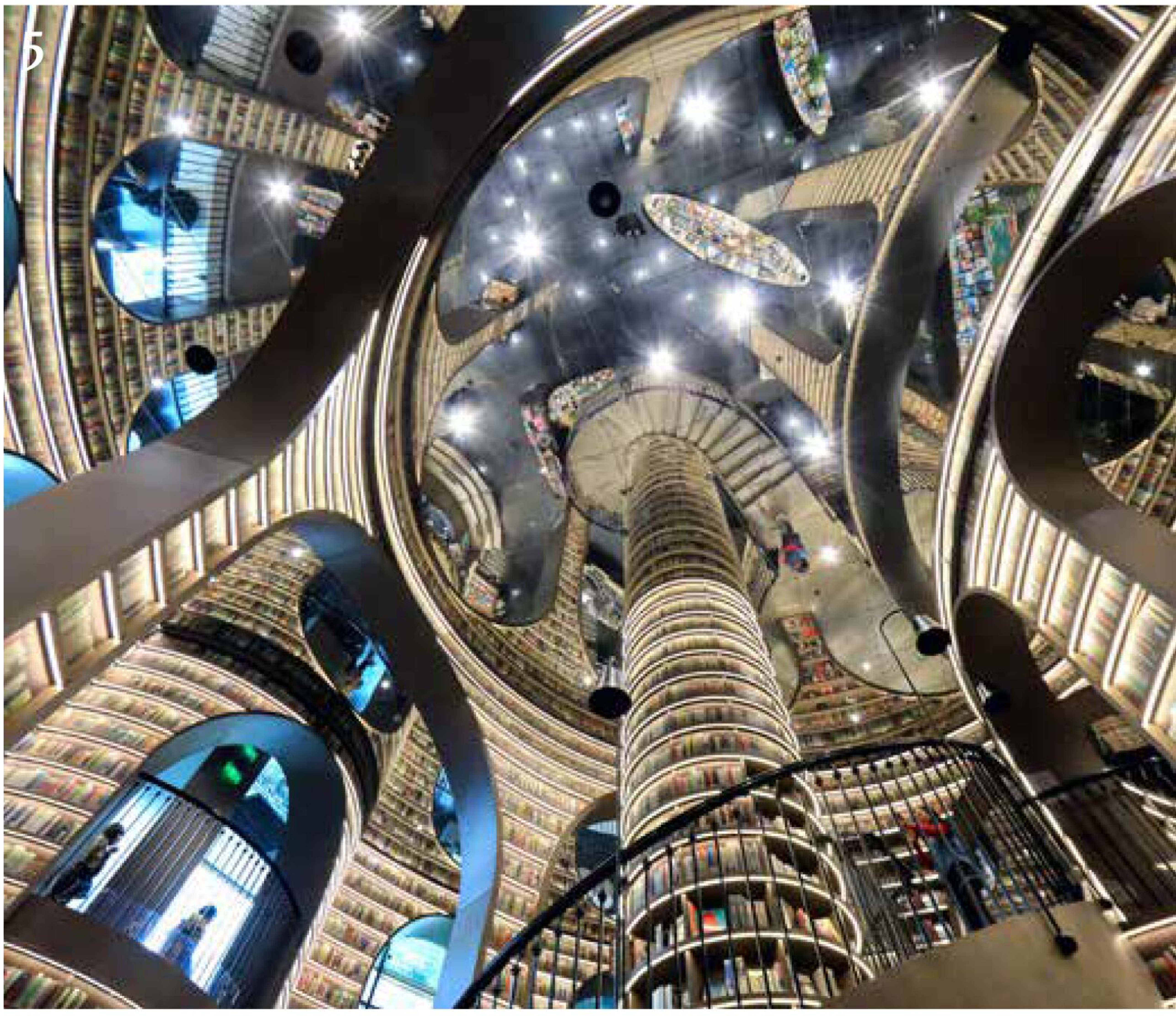

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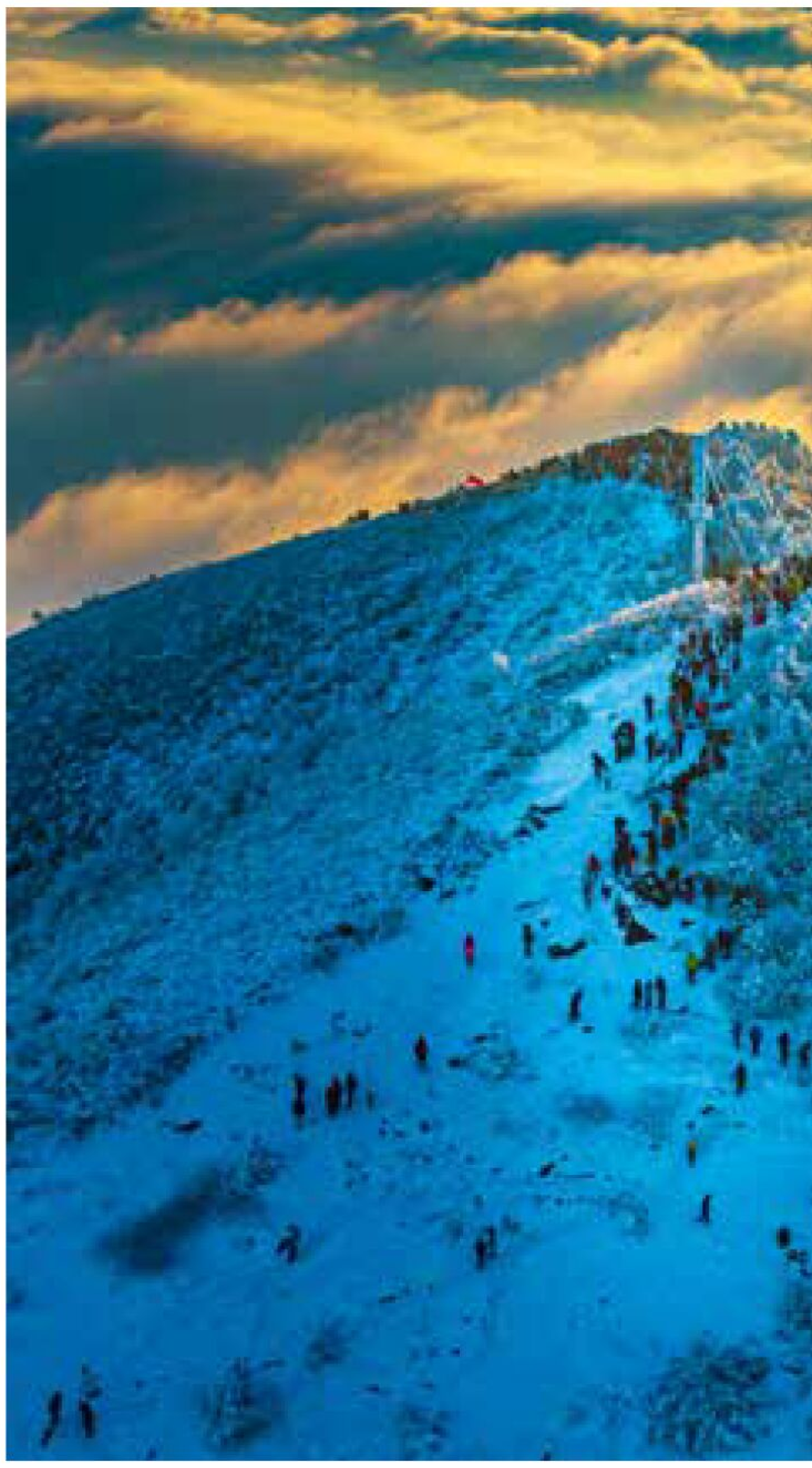

1. Golden rapeseed flowers brighten up spring, Miaoqian Village, Shexian, Anhui Province, March 16, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. The sun rises over Mount Taizijian, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, February 24, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. Fishing nets create wave trails in the Qiantangjiang River tidal bore, the world's largest tidal bore, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, March 1, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. Artisan Wang Lijuan carves beautiful spring scenes on *qingtuan*, or green rice dumplings, a traditional snack popular in southern China around the Qingming Festival, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, March 18, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

5. A pair of long-tailed minivets frolic around a tree branch, Kunming, Yunnan Province, February 19, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

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Overseas Warehouses Facilitate Shenzhen's Cross-border E-commerce

China Newsweek March 10, 2025

Cross-border e-commerce operators in Shenzhen have established or partnered with overseas warehouses in target countries to facilitate streamlined outbound logistics, expedited deliveries and localised aftersales services since 2023. In January, China enacted a tax-rebate policy enabling domestic sellers delivering products to overseas warehouses to apply for tax refunds once they have completed customs clearance. The policy aims to ease financial strain. As China's top city in terms of foreign trade volume in 2024, Shenzhen is home to about 150,000 cross-border e-commerce entities. Today's e-commerce exporters are more concerned with seeking overseas orders and completing deliveries. Apart from e-commerce, the constant innovation by local private enterprises also boosted Shenzhen's exports last year. However, experts warned it will be challenging for the city this year to keep the momentum as strong as in 2024.

Surviving the Surge in Global Downsizing

Yi Magazine February 1, 2025

2025
WHAT
CAN WE DO?

A huge wave of downsizing has swept the world with high-tech, healthcare, finance, electronic games and retail sectors all laying off substantial employee numbers. Age discrimination, which mainly targets those of 35 and above, is particularly prevalent in mammoth online platforms such as Didi Chuxing and Alibaba in China where working overtime is mandatory, which older people may find arduous. Those who prefer to job hop for better deals find it harder to get higher salaries and promotions. Many young and middle-aged Chinese are taking on second jobs. One Chinese headhunter called on people to be more extroverted so they stand out in today's domestic job market. To be relieved from pressures or mundane jobs like those of civil servants, some choose to emigrate abroad.

Medical Sector Surges with AI Tech Tide

Weekly on Stocks March 1, 2025

Following a consecutive four-year low in China's A-shares markets, the pharmaceutical and medical equipment sector bolstered by AI technology rebounded in February. Prices of both the major indexes and leading firms soared in the month, which could indicate a promising future for the industry where the pharmaceutical and equipment firms have made decade-long efforts to develop cost-effective products targeting the global market. These firms have been particularly profitable in the past two years after the use of AI accelerated their research and clinical data analyses. They are entitled to price their own innovative medicines which are covered by commercial medical insurance. The burgeoning industry has been noticed by overseas institutions like Goldman Sachs. However, experts warned that the complicated geopolitical situation may impact the industry, and companies should take this into account.

Job Market Restructured to Raise Employment

Minsheng Weekly

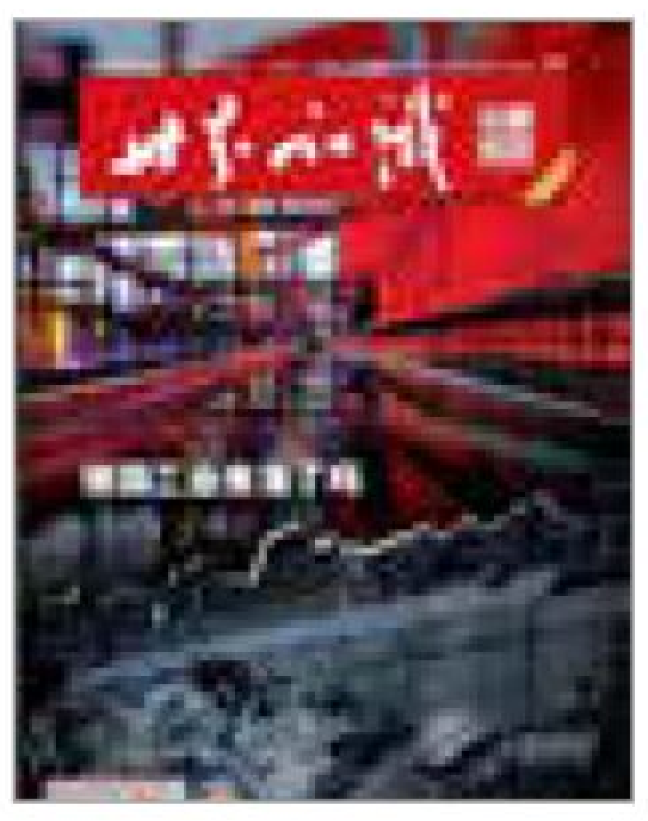
February 10, 2025

China has intensified efforts to direct job hunters, particularly fresh graduates, to seek opportunities in small- and medium-sized private manufacturers, countryside communities and nursing homes, which lack well-trained employees. There are 4.5 million vacancies in jobs involving digitally controlled high-end machines and robotic products, and there are 25 million vacancies for tech staff in digital and IT industries. However, more than half of the graduates in 2024 favoured more secure jobs in State-owned enterprises or as civil servants, even though there are fewer openings. There are programmes to encourage students to work in rural areas where agricultural products and cultural tourism are burgeoning through online promotions, creating business opportunities for young entrepreneurs. Job hunting apps enable the seamless connection between jobs and job hunters. Still, as experts point out, given the increase in college graduates, employment remains under pressure.

Is German Industry Undergoing an Inexorable Decline?

World Affairs

February 16, 2025



German manufacturers, including Volkswagen, BASF and Thyssen Krupp are downsizing, and the proportion of the secondary industry in Germany's economy in 2023 dropped by 2.6 percent from 23 percent. German economy is usually supported by the pillars of automobile, pharmaceutical, chemical and mechanical manufacturing. Losing its competitive edge based on innovation, engineering education, harmonious labour-capital relations, a huge overseas market and cheap Russian gas, the country is challenged by the new round of industrial revolution and geopolitical tensions exemplified by the Russia-Ukraine war. The country is advised to boost the economy by riding the tide of green and digital technologies. To lower costs, many German enterprises have shifted their businesses to China. Experts believe the resilience of German industry, which survived the global financial crisis in 2008, will persist as long as economic challenges are not politicised.

"With the resurgence of protectionism, a special green free trade arrangement will be essential to fighting climate change. This should include slashing tariffs and removing non-tariff barriers on goods and services that benefit the environment and climate. Leveraging existing regional trade treaties like the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) as the foundation for green trade can accelerate this process."

Ma Jun, director of the Beijing Institute of Green Finance and Sustainability, writing for the China Chief Economist Forum in March

"Frankly, if universities approach reform as a means to expand their academic domains and secure more resources, the efficiency of investment will remain low. So, we have to avoid 'expansion-driven' reforms and focus on structural, endogenous reforms, improving quality and creativity while building a self-sustaining education model."

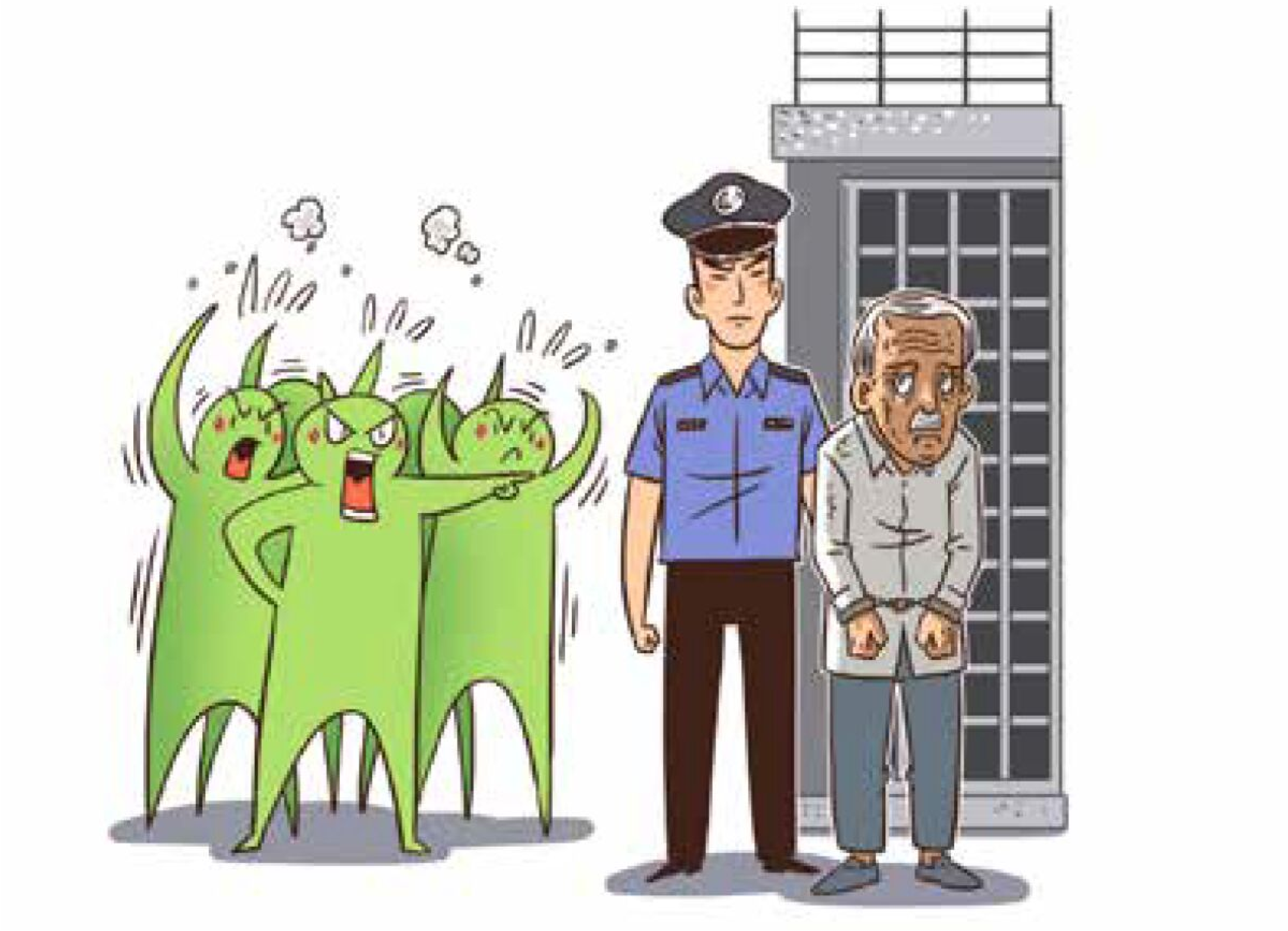
Jin Li, president of Shanghai-based Fudan University and a delegate to China's National People's Congress (NPC), speaking about university reforms during the 2025 two sessions held in Beijing from March 5 to 11

"The vertical fiscal relationship between central and local governments actually constrains two kinds of relationships we often discuss: the relationship between government and the market, and that between government and society. Take for example 'deep-water fishing,' where local police illegally arrest businesspeople out of their jurisdictions for economic benefits, such as imposing fines and seizing assets. On the surface, it appears to be a legal issue, but on a deeper level, it is closely tied to central-local fiscal relations, especially the financial struggles of local governments."

Liu Shangxi, senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Fiscal Sciences, writing for Party paper *Guangming Daily* in February

"The auto industry has entered an advanced phase of moving towards smart driving [including driver assistance and auto driving], which has become a key battleground for the auto industry."

Lei Jun, president and CEO of Xiaomi Auto, urging the mass production of self-driving cars during the 2025 two sessions



"China's legal system has long sought to balance humanitarianism and public security when handling crimes committed by elderly people. However, with the rise in such crimes, it is becoming increasingly urgent to find a more reasonable approach to ensure judicial fairness, social governance and crime prevention."

Su Mingyue, council member of the Chinese Society of Criminology, commenting on the cases of two men in their 70s who were spared detention for sexually harnessing two women, in her article for *ChinaReport's* Chinese edition

"If the legal marriage age were lowered to 18, the main effect would be a significant reduction in delayed marriage registrations, but it would do little to increase overall marriage and birth rates. Lowering the marriage age is purely a statistical adjustment – those who intend to marry will still do so, they'd only be registering earlier. It would not affect the proportion of people not willing to marry."

Chen Liangfei, political news editor at The Paper, commenting on a proposal to lower China's legal marriage age to 18 during the 2025 two sessions in March

"Basic education is a crucial stage for children's cognitive development and shaping their world view. During this stage, fostering critical thinking, intellectual growth and knowledge acquisition is especially important. Children need to develop strong independent learning and critical thinking habits. Therefore, educators have to carefully consider how AI technologies can be used to support children's healthy development."

Guo Kunyu, maths professor at Fudan University and CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) member, discussing the role of AI in education during the 2025 two sessions

"Each year, over 10 million students take the national college entrance exam, and the number is increasing. But most of these candidates do not aspire to academic research. They do all sorts of jobs that society needs. While the exam helps allocate students to suitable job training, it is not designed to select the most creative scholars. I suggest providing other admission channels to the top 5-10 percent of high school students with interests and talent in maths or other core subjects to spur their creativity and interest in academic research."

Qiu Chengtong, chair professor at Tsinghua University, in a recent interview with *ChinaReport*'s Chinese edition

New Rules to Label AI-generated Content to Increase Transparency

A new directive aimed at the AI sector has been released recently to increase transparency and user safety by enforcing mandatory labelling of AI-generated content.

China's National Internet Information Office (NIIO), the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and public security and broadcast agencies issued the finalised rules on March 14, which will come into force from September 1.

The notice, Measures for the Labelling of AI-Generated Content Identification, comes in response to the spread of false information, AI-related fraud and the misuse of technologies which are becoming rife amid the fast development of AI, the NIIO said.

The measures require the use of explicit labels, for example in the form of watermarks, and implicit labels embedded in the metadata, which will help users identify fraudulent or false information, and better clarify the responsibilities of the parties involved in publishing AI content.

Explicit labels must be added to AI-generated content, including text, audio, video, images and virtual scenes, while hidden ones show the type of generated content, the name of the providers and relevant information related to content creation like the codes. Content providers must clearly tell users in the service agreement how they label AI-generated content and ask users to read and understand clauses related to AI-generated content management.

The notice requires platforms to confirm whether an internet service provider engages in AI content generation and to update its labelling based on the rules.

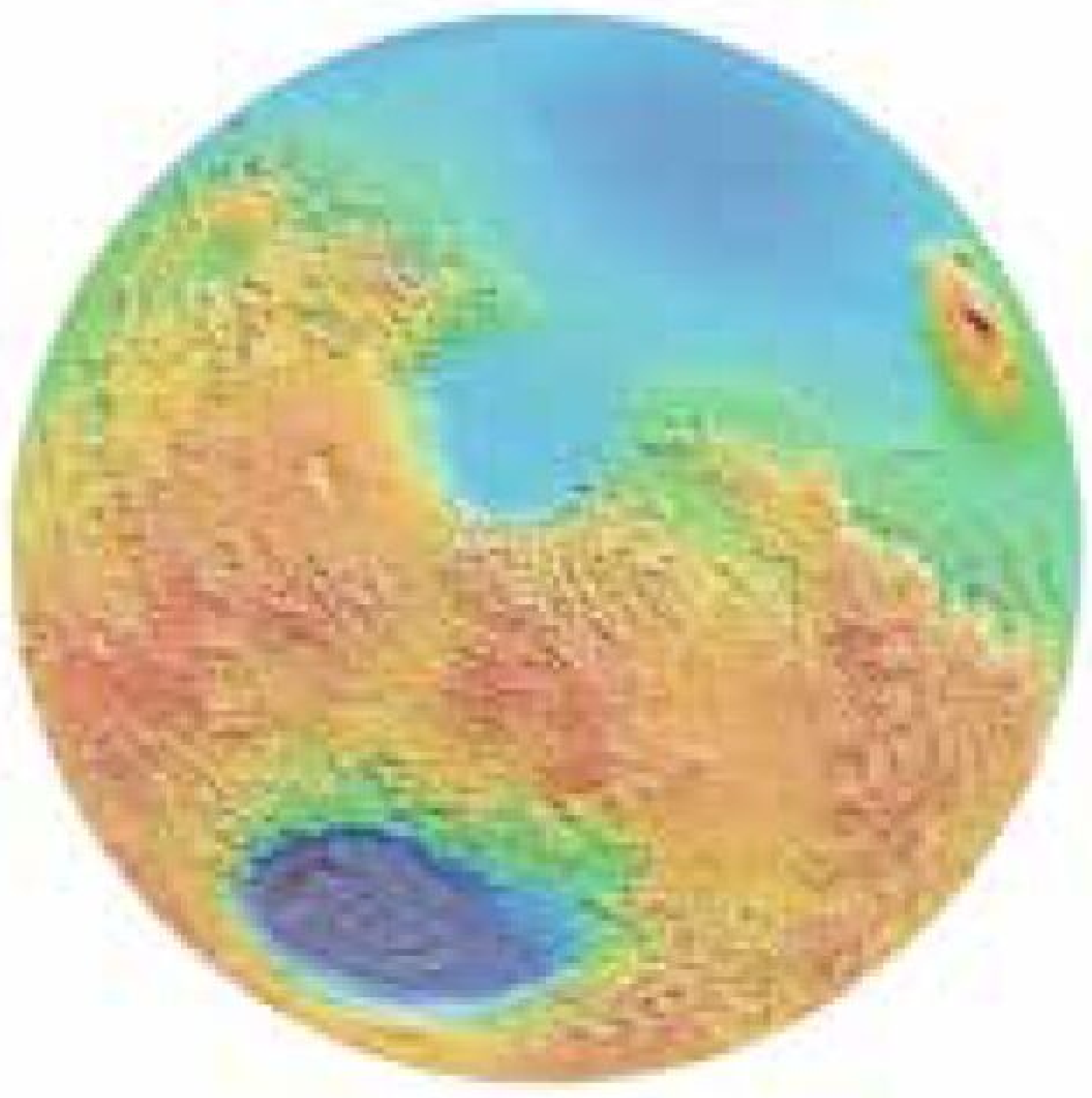
The NIIO said the measures were based on previous regulations on generative internet information and the algorithm for the service of internet information. Serving as a standard, it details the management of the whole process of content generation, covering who produces the content and where it is produced. The authorities also released specific measures for the labelling, especially measures to keep firms' costs to a minimum.

The security of AI information was a major concern at the two sessions, China's annual meetings for the top legislature and top political advisory body held in Beijing in early March. Many celebrities complained they had been the victim of image theft after AI-generated advertising spread online. Experts said the new rules will solve the problem by helping users tell whether images of famous people are real or fake. It will also greatly constrain the spread of deepfakes.

Xiao Youdan, a researcher at the Institutes of Science and Development, Chinese Academy of Sciences, told news portal The Paper that one of the advantages of the new rules is that they reduce the difficulties platforms have in managing uploaded content, since they can track the labels down to the original producer. Those who forward or reuse AI-generated information are not allowed to delete or change the original hidden labels.

"The labelling measures are expected to solve new problems arising from the fast development of AI at low cost. Its purpose is to realise a large-scale, highly reliable and low-cost management," Xiao said, adding that when most people prefer to put more into development than security, the new rules send a positive signal for the healthy development of the AI industry.

Rover Detects First Evidence of Ocean on Mars



Using data from China's Zhurong Mars rover, Chinese scientists have found the most direct evidence that there was once an ancient ocean in the mid-to-low latitude regions of Mars.

Carrying a ground-penetrating radar, the rover found evidence of parallel coastal-like structures about 10-15 metres below the landing area of Zhurong, similar to beaches on Earth.

Zhurong landed on Mars in May 2021 in the south of the Utopia Planitia, an enormous basin structure in the northern hemisphere of Mars.

Those findings indicate that the basin might have experienced a long-term warm and moist climate. It means the planet, now dry and dusty, may once have had conditions to support the existence of liquid water in the form of a large ocean, which must have existed for millions of years to form the thick layers of sand. Any evidence of previous life could be found in such structures, scientists said.

With similar geological features and seasonal and day-night changes like Earth, Mars is regarded as a top destination for interplanetary immigration, but past exploration mostly concentrated on high-latitude regions.

The findings were published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* of the United States of America (PNAS) in February.

Endangered Species See Remarkable Recovery

New data from China's National Forestry and Grassland Administration shows a recovery in some of China's most endangered plant and animal species.

The number of wild giant pandas rose from 1,100 in the 1980s to nearly 1,900 now, and that of snow leopards has increased to more than 1,200. The number of Siberian tigers and leopards has increased from 27 and 42 in 2017 when the government established pilot national parks to 70 and 80 now. Similarly, the number of wild Asian elephants has doubled to around 300 and that of Tibetan antelope has quintupled to over 300,000.

More than 200 varieties of rare or endangered plants have also made a comeback in the wild, such as *Cycas debaoensis*, a palm-like plant, and *Euryodendron excelsum*, a type of hardwood tree found only in Yangchun, Guangdong Province, which was on the verge of extinction. The *Carpinus putoensis*, or Putuo hornbeam, of which only one existed when discovered, now has more than 4,000 trees, and the number of *Abies beshanzuensis*, a type of fir, has soared from three to over 4,000.

These achievements highlight China's constant efforts to protect and restore habitats, including improving protection laws, launching lists of key habitats for wild animals and plants, standardising the construction of national parks and restoring natural reserves. Experts said that habitat protection will have an "umbrella effect" where the protection of a key species will benefit other species and thus ensure biodiversity in the habitat's ecology.

Chinese Space Station to Host Pakistani Astronauts

China and Pakistan have signed an agreement on selecting and training Pakistani astronauts to visit China's Tiangong orbiting space station.

According to the agreement inked on February 28 in Islamabad, Pakistan will select five astronauts for training in China, before they rotate to the space station alongside Chinese crew members for short-duration missions. Two astronauts from Pakistan are expected to be first chosen to go to space, according to Pakistani media.

China and Pakistan started space cooperation in 1990 when China launched Pakistan's first satellite. In 2024, China's Chang'e-6 moon probe carried a Pakistani satellite to the moon, which sent back Pakistan's first picture from the lunar surface.

Experts said the bilateral agreement is a milestone for China's space station to become more international, which will encourage more countries, especially developing ones, to join in space exploration.

Advanced Carbon Capture Vessel Delivered in Shanghai

The world's first floating production, storage and offloading (FPSO) vessel equipped with an onboard carbon capture and storage system, the *Agogo* FPSO, was officially delivered in Shanghai on March 3.

At 333 metres long and 60 metres wide, the *Agogo* FPSO has a production capacity of 120,000 barrels of crude oil a day, and by using cutting-edge carbon reduction technologies, can capture carbon emissions produced during voyages and oil production. It can also generate electricity through waste gas.

This equates to carbon emission reductions of 27 percent, about 230,000 tons each year, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

The vessel is the third FPSO project conducted by COSCO Shipping Heavy Industry, a Shanghai-based company engaged in shipbuilding and marine support services, and Yinson Holdings, a transportation and logistics company based in Malaysia which will deliver the vessel to Azule Energy, Angola's biggest independent oil and gas supplier.

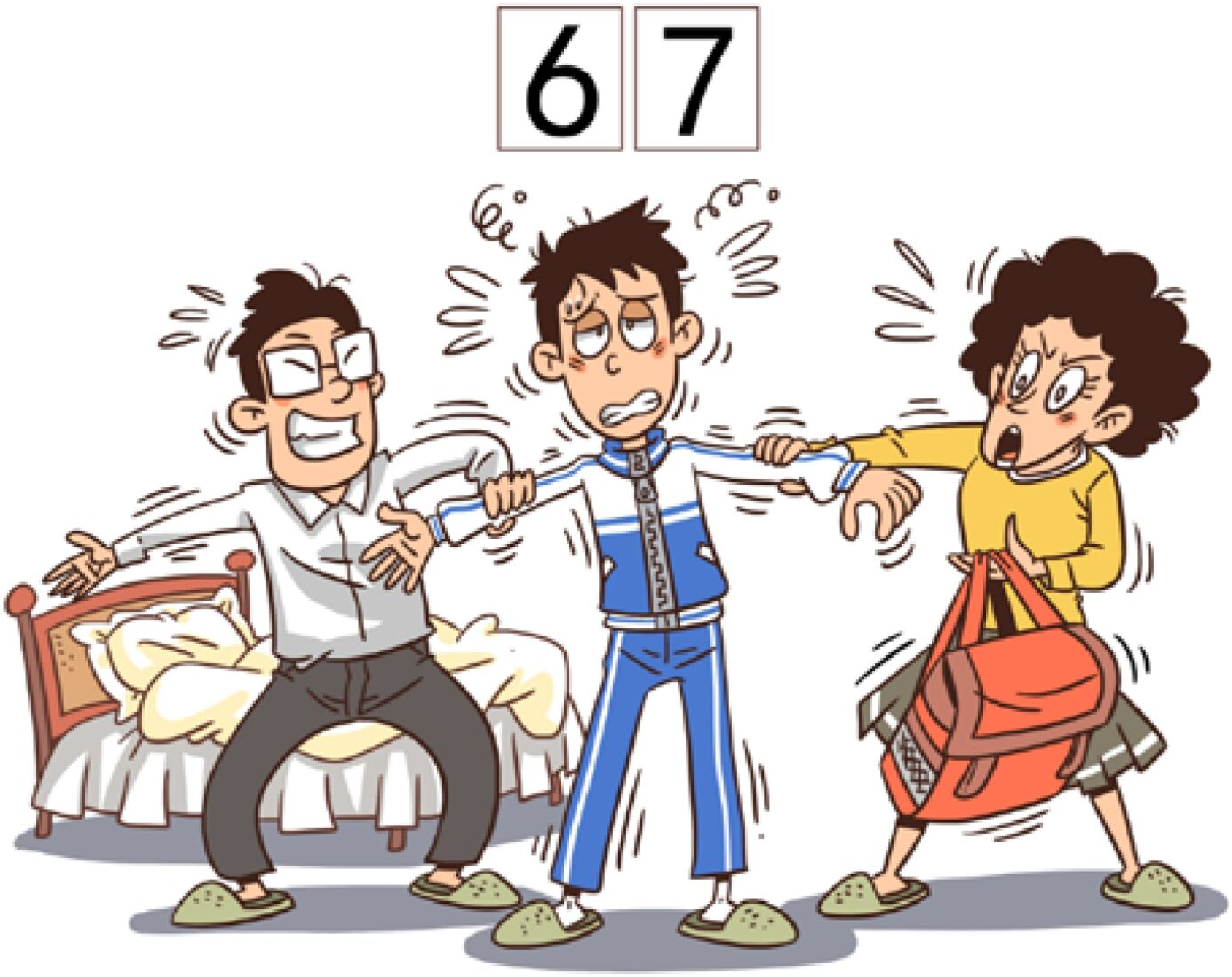
First Wholly Foreign-invested Hospital Opens in Tianjin

China's first wholly foreign-invested tertiary hospital, the Perennial General Hospital, opened in Tianjin on February 26.

Established by the Singapore-based Perennial Holdings, a real estate and healthcare firm, the multi-disciplinary hospital has 500 beds and an international department. It was built and equipped at a cost of 1 billion yuan (US$142.9m). Doctors and medical groups can use the hospital's shared facilities and resources for diagnostics, lab tests and conducting operations.

The hospital comes after China issued a document in November 2024 that ordered an expansion of pilot areas that are open to wholly foreign-invested hospitals.

According to the document, the authorities defined nine cities as pilot areas, including Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Foreign-invested hospitals are not allowed to set up blood and genetics-related departments, such as hematology and organ transplants, nor can they get involved in assisted reproduction, obstetrics, infectious diseases or areas related to traditional Chinese medicine.



We're Not Machines: Students Rejoice, Parents Worry Over New Weekend Policy

Education authorities across China are enacting a landmark policy to restore two-day weekends for high school students. The move aims to alleviate some of the intense academic burden they endure in preparation for the grueling *gaokao*, the country's national college entrance exam.

Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province has taken the lead, requiring high schools to grant 10th and 11th graders full weekends off starting in March 2025. Other cities, including Yangzhou and Nantong in Jiangsu Province and Changsha in Hunan Province, are expected to follow suit.

China officially began having two-day weekends for everyone on May 1, 1995. However, the rule was not strictly enforced in high schools. Most high schools operate on a six-day schedule, with some regions offering only one or two days off per month. The routine has taken a toll on students' physical and mental health, prompting calls for reform.

Many netizens support the change, arguing that it eases students' burdens and challenges *neijuan*, or China's toxic culture of academic competition. "We are not test-taking machines," students said online.

But some parents worry the policy will exacerbate educational inequality. Wealthy families can afford private tutoring on weekends, giving their children an edge, while students from lower-income backgrounds may struggle to keep up. Others fear that without structured school time, children will waste weekends glued to screens instead of studying.

Experts see the reform as a broader shift in China's approach to education, shifting from producing high-performing test-takers to fostering creative, well-rounded individuals.

Netizen Comments:

- "As an 11th grader, I fully support two-day weekends. The current schedule is exhausting –we sleep less than six hours a night! Senior students only get two days off per month. Why do adults get weekends but students don't? We're not machines."
- "This won't truly help. As long as the *gaokao* remains unchanged, the rat race will continue."
- "Under this new policy, students who lack self-discipline or access to private tutoring will fall behind even faster. But isn't that fair? You reap what you sow."

Source: Sina Weibo

Expert Comments:

Duan Xinxing, psychology professor, China University of Mining and Technology: "This 48-hour break each week marks a quiet but significant education revolution. Schools must learn to let go, families must take initiative in education planning, and students must become masters of their own time. The goal is to help students find their own balance between freedom and discipline."

Source: Huashang Daily

Chu Zhaohui, researcher, China National Academy of Educational Sciences: "A 'passive personality' has long been an issue among Chinese youth. Two-day weekends can help students reclaim their autonomy and the ability to take the initiative without constant external pressure."

Source: Chengdu Economic Daily

Zhang Xuefeng, influencer and extracurricular education expert: "If you're a high school student, you're probably thrilled. But if you're a parent, you might feel anxious... Imagine this: Other parents are secretly hiring tutors for weekend lessons, and you don't even know about it. Wouldn't that make you uneasy?"

Source: Zhang's livestream on Douyin

Lights Off, Laptop On? China's New Overtime Rules Stir Debate

Chinese companies are taking new steps to tackle the notorious "996" culture prevalent at tech companies – working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week. Since February 27, 2025, Shenzhen-based drone giant DJI has mandated that all employees leave the office by 9 pm sharp. At the designated time, human resource managers actively enforce the rule, ensuring that no one stays late at their desks. DJI had previously been known for its extremely long hours, with employees frequently working past midnight.

The move has sparked a trend among major corporations. Appliance manufacturers Haier and Midea have adopted similar policies: Haier now enforces a strict two-day weekend, while Midea requires employees to clock out by 6:20 pm.

The changes ignited heated discussion online. On March 9, the hashtag "DJI's Mandatory 9 pm Clock-out Policy" topped the trending list on Sina Weibo, racking up 74.1 million views and 17,000 posts. Many netizens applauded the shift, arguing that addressing the culture of companies' implicitly requiring employees to overwork is long overdue. However, others remained sceptical, pointing out that being forced to leave the office doesn't necessarily mean less work. Some worried that employees might still have to finish their tasks at home, without overtime pay. Netizens called for stronger measures to ensure workers' legal rights to rest and leisure are fully protected.

In response, on March 16, the central government released a "Special Action Plan to Boost Consumption." The plan emphasises the protection of workers' rights to rest and holidays, requiring authorities to strengthen oversight of companies. Employers are now obligated to prohibit excessive overtime and strictly implement paid annual leave policies.

INFLUENCER

Daniel Wu

Renowned US-born Hong Kong actor and filmmaker Daniel Wu has recently gained widespread attention on Chinese social media after launching an online English course designed to teach his fans authentic spoken English.

Born in 1974 in Berkeley, California, Wu grew up in Orinda, California in an academically accomplished family and developed an early passion for martial arts. In 1997, he graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in architecture. After graduation, he moved to Hong Kong and entered the film industry, where his striking appearance quickly made him stand out, winning over millions of fans. Wu is particularly known for his performances in Hong Kong gangster and martial arts films, such as the critically acclaimed *New Police Story* (2004).

On February 26, Wu debuted a new course on Douyin, Daniel Wu Teaches English, which covers various real-life scenarios such as grocery shopping, job interviews and hotel check-ins. His account quickly gained traction, amassing over 1.52 million followers. In just five days, the course generated over five million yuan (US$690,000).

While many of his fans eagerly embraced the opportunity to learn English from their idol, calling the price reasonable and the experience unique, others pointed out that in each 10-minute lesson, Wu himself only teaches for about five minutes, leaving the rest to assistant instructors.

On March 16, Wu posted a follow-up video addressing the controversy, explaining his motivation behind the project: "Language is like a key that unlocks the doors to different cultures. I hope this initiative can help more people on their English-learning journey."

Justice for Janitors: Students Demand Better Conditions for Cleaners

In recent months, an online campaign titled "Give Cleaning Aunties a Proper Lounge" has gained momentum, led by Gen-Z college students across China. The movement highlights the poor working conditions of cleaning staff, most of whom are women, employed in schools, office buildings, shopping malls and other public institutions. Many cleaners are forced to rest in small, cramped cubicles within public restrooms, often eating their meals there due to a lack of proper facilities.

Students nationwide are using their smartphones to document these conditions, posting photos online to draw attention to the issue. The viral campaign has led to a growing call for workplace reform, demanding that public institutions provide dedicated rest areas for cleaning staff.

A standardised proposal has emerged from the movement: activists urge institutions to establish independent lounges for cleaners, equipped with essentials such as hot water, lockers, folding mattresses, medical kits, power sockets and microwaves. Supporters argue that recognising and protecting sanitation workers' rights is a matter of basic human dignity.

The hashtag "Cleaning Aunties" has attracted over 110 million views and 423,000 posts on RedNote, reflecting widespread public concern. Many netizens have praised the students' activism, with some universities and office buildings now pledging to improve break areas for their cleaning staff.

Building Safety

Fire Alarm

Experts warn that as China builds more super-tall residential buildings, fire safety standards are far too lax, and responsibility is unclear

By Lin Qixin and Xie Ying

With a ferocious fire ripping through her high-rise apartment block and heavy smoke choking escape routes, likely caused by a violent gas explosion on the 28th floor, a woman who lived a floor above was unable to escape. As the fire spread through several floors of the 44-storey Shenzhen Bay Yuefu residential complex on the afternoon of December 11, 2024, a witness told the *China Daily* that she had seen someone falling from the building. The victim was later pronounced dead.

Firefighters in the city of Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, reacted quickly to the blaze, which started at 2:46 pm. Sending 16 fire trucks and 80 firefighters, the blaze was extinguished by 6 pm. There were no other casualties

Soon after the fire, Shenzhen emergency management bureau ordered updates and repairs to the building's fire safety system.

The tragedy yet again triggered public concern about fire risks in high rises. Wang Wei, senior commander of the Office of the National Fire and Rescue Administration said at a press conference in September 2024 that in the first eight months of the year, 36,000 high-rise fires had killed 203 people. High-rise fires accounted for 5.4 percent of total fires, but caused 15 percent of total deaths from fire during the period.

Sun Xuan, director of the Fire Institute, China Academy of Building Research, warned that fire risks associated with high-rise residential buildings are still not adequately recognised, though there is a much greater fire risk inherent to high-density buildings due to more use of electrical equipment and gas.

High Risk and Hard Rescue

According to a fire safety regulation on civil high-rise buildings published by China's Ministry of Emergency Management (MoEM) in June 2021, residential buildings taller than 27 metres are defined as high rises. According to design standards for civil buildings published by Chinese housing authorities in 2019, buildings over 100 metres are defined as super-high buildings.

"In the past few decades, high-rise and super-high residential buildings have become a major category of new buildings," Li Xiaojiang, former director of the China Academy of Urban Planning & Design, told *ChinaReport*.

Data from Xu Chuansheng, a member of the China Fire Protection Association and a national expert on fire safety, showed that at the end of 2023, there were 1.15 million high-rise buildings in China, the most in the world. This

(Top) Firefighters extinguish a fire at the Xintiandi Building in Tianjin, August 22, 2023. Over 284 firefighters and 62 fire trucks from 23 stations attended the blaze (Photo by VCG)

(Above) The aftermath of a fire in a high-rise building in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, February 23, 2024. Fifteen people died and 44 were injured in the blaze, thought to have been started by e-bike batteries (Photo by VCG)

includes 130,000 buildings for public use, like hotels, department stores, offices and government buildings, as well as 1.02 million residential buildings. Data from the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat based in Chicago showed that by August 2024, China was home to 3,194 high-rise buildings of a height between 150 and 300 metres and 120 buildings of a height above 300 metres, the most in the world.

Fire risks are mounting with the growth in the number of high-rise buildings.

In the first nine months of 2024, there were 38,750 high-rise fires nationwide, surpassing the total of 23,633 fires recorded in 2023, Wang Tianrui, deputy director of the Fire Supervision Department at the National Fire and Rescue Administration, said at the 2nd Meeting of Architecture Fire Control held in Shandong Province in October 2024.

Xu, who served as a firefighter for 27 years, said that high-rise fires are characterised by difficulties in rescuing victims, fast spread and multiple ignition points.

"Due to the large size and height of high-rise buildings, the number of residents and the complicated inner structure, it's very hard to put out a high-rise fire and save people quickly," he said.

Although regulations require residential buildings above 33 metres to be equipped with a fire safety lift, firefighters still mostly climb the stairs, given the uncertainties in the fire and concerns over poor maintenance of fire safety facilities.

"Climbing up a high rise is time-consuming. If a lot of people are trapped and the smoke is heavy, respirators won't work for too long, so rescuers have to take breaks," Xu added.

External rescue is equally difficult. Most aerial ladder trucks only reach to between 30-50 metres. Where they can safely operate depends on other factors such as ease of parking, whether structures such as underground parking lots can bear the weight of a fire truck, water supply and wind speeds. In the Shenzhen fire, a ladder truck with a lift of 101 metres attended. These can elevate to around 35 storeys high, currently the tallest operational aerial ladder trucks in the world. A fire truck like this costs 24 million yuan (US$3.4m).

Xu warned that vertical shafts such as lifts and utility ducts speed up the spread of smoke and flames, causing a "chimney effect" which makes fires more destructive and rescues even harder.

On February 23, 2024, a high-rise residential building caught fire in Nanjing, capital of Jiangsu Province. It spread quickly from the first floor through vertical shafts, killing 15 and injuring 44 others. The fire was likely caused by exploding e-bike batteries.

Low Standards

High rises pose greater fire risks as they contain more electrical equipment and gas lines. Short circuits, leaks and power overloads, as well as misuse of appliances and electronics can trigger fires. Yet Sun Xuan warned that Chinese fire control regulations for high-rise residential buildings are weak, particularly compared to public buildings.

China has very low requirements for installing fire alarms and water sprinklers, Sun said. Only residential buildings above 100 metres must have them, while for buildings below this height, installation is just recommended.

"Some building developers ensure they only build up to 98 or 99 metres to avoid the compulsory regulation... So I'm much more worried about fire safety in residential buildings below 100 metres," a fire safety expert, who asked for anonymity, told *ChinaReport*.

There are usually no gas leak alarms either, according to experts. Zhang Wanmin, a retired firefighter and a fire investigator at the MoEM, told *ChinaReport* that gas leak blazes are more deadly due to the release of toxic gases and the risk of explosions, which can also compromise a building's fire safety facilities.

"These gas facility standards for fire safety are far too low," Zhang said.

At the Architecture Fire Control meeting, Wang Tianrui said that foreign countries have very strict fire safety standards, including for family dwellings, while China lacks equivalent rules.

"That's because we didn't previously pay enough attention to fire safety," Sun said.

Killer Materials

On September 16, 2022, a telecommunication building in Changsha, Hunan Province caught fire. Although there were no casualties, the fire caused losses of 7.91 million yuan (US$1.1m). Media reported the fire was caused by poorly placed flammables and external combustible materials increased the fire's spread.

While China detailed technical standards for external insulation materials based on different heights of buildings in 2014, Sun said substandard and uncertified materials are often used due to cost concerns and poor supervision.

"You can't get cheap insulation materials that are also effective, fire resistant and durable," Xu said. "These materials exist, but they are expensive to buy, install and maintain," he added.

According to Sun, supervising authorities do carry out quality control tests on insulation materials, but some developers cheat by submitting good-quality materials for testing, while using substandard ones in construction. When a building is to be finished, the materials are hidden inside the building, which makes it hard for inspectors to check.

"Some inspectors would rather turn a blind eye even when they know some developers cheat, because they know meeting the requirements is hard. For a few reasons, not all our high-rise buildings conform to fire safety requirements," Xu said. "In comparison, as regulations for public buildings have clearer definitions on who is responsible for fire safety and will impose stricter penalties [for violations], developers don't often cheat on materials," he added.

If fire safety violations are found in public buildings, property managers might be forced to quit, or they can be fined. If a fire breaks out and they are found responsible, the penalties will be higher, depending on the severity of the blaze. If there is a fire in a residential building caused by a resident, they can be penalised, too, but as yet, authorities lack the power to effectively penalise residential property managers if they inspect and find faulty fire safety systems, as there is no clear delineation of who is responsible.

Broken Equipment

On January 30, 2024, a fire broke out on the 14th floor of a residential building in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou Province. A resident tried hard to extinguish the blaze with the hydrants installed on each floor, only to find there was no water in them. Firefighters had to bring water all the way up to the 14th floor, increasing the response time. The resident's mother died.

Li Sicheng, dean of the Fire Control School, China People's Police University,

Fire trucks extinguish a fire during a drill in Changde, Hunan Province, November 9, 2024 (Photo by VCG) told *ChinaReport* that many fire safety facilities are not maintained, and are therefore useless for fighting fires.

"The fire safety facilities in some high-rise residential buildings are basically not fit for use," Huang Anyong, director of the Real Estate Management Institute at Southeast University in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, told *ChinaReport*.

According to Li, besides fire stations, community police bureaus are also responsible for disseminating fire safety information, as well as community management organisations and power suppliers.

The main problem is the lack of experienced personnel to conduct fire safety spot checks. As residential units come lower on the list than public buildings, they are unlikely to be chosen for checks.

"Non-professional agencies like community commissions and community police bureaus generally don't get much professional training in fire safety... and even when they do spot checks [on residential buildings], it's probably only a box-ticking exercise," Li said. "It seems everyone is managing fire safety, but no one does it very well," he added.

Experts believe that building managers, who collect fees from residents to maintain public areas and grounds, should take more responsibility for fire safety. This should include ensuring all fire safety equipment is in working order, educating residents on fire safety, and ensuring there are safe evacuation routes.

But since there are no national rules to compel property managers to ensure fire safety standards and practices, most do not bother much.

"Property managers have a lot of work to do, plus fire safety systems aren't often used, so it's hard for them to discover if there are problems," Huang said. "Their work focuses more on things like sanitation, landscaping and lift maintenance," he added.

Even if building managers promote fire safety, many residents ignore it, for example, continuing to bring e-bikes and batteries inside buildings to recharge them, although this is a major cause of fires.

The Nanjing fire was caused by a battery igniting among improperly parked e-bikes at the base of the building, despite property managers enforcing parking regulations for two years. Before the fire, many residents reported the problem to community authorities, but nothing was done as there is still no clarity on who should be responsible for ensuring the rules are followed. Property managers can only ask residents to follow the rules, but have no power to act against those who flout them.

Huang pointed out who pays for fire safety is an obstacle too, because there is no regulation that lays out who should pay to maintain and manage fire safety facilities – the residents, building management or wider community authorities.

"For older residential buildings, the public repair fund [paid into by residents] is far from enough to cover fire safety facilities, and it's hard to ask residents to pay for it all by themselves," Huang said, suggesting that property management companies prioritise fire safety equipment over vanity projects like beautifying public areas when using public maintenance funds.

"Fire risks caused by unmaintained facilities get worse as buildings age, and this could prove a heavy burden for everyone in society," Xu said.

Reducing Risks

Experts and insiders are trying to reduce this burden. Drones are starting to be used to fight fires in buildings over 100 metres.

"Besides observing the fire and danger spots, drones can be equipped with fire-extinguishing equipment to douse a fire from above. They can also drop rescue equipment to trapped people, such as gas masks, fire-resistant blankets and ropes," Zhang Wanmin told *ChinaReport*.

A few provinces are already using drones. Henan Province has listed them as a new technology to be promoted in fire rescue, and Guangdong established the province's first drone fire rescue unit in Dongguan City in November 2024. On January 15, the MoEM said at a press conference that they will speed up the establishment of aerial rescue teams and the use of drones to fight fires.

Yet Zhang warned that drone use is limited now.

"The whole country only has 20 sets of this equipment and operating them is very difficult. Since few firefighters have received training and the operation is not covered by specialist insurance yet, not many fire bureaus are risking using drones," Zhang said.

"Although China is leading the world in aerial fire rescue, drone rescue, as a new technology, is still in its preliminary phase," he added.

Most experts agree the most pressing task is to improve building design and safety standards. For example, sprinklers, fire alarms and gas alarms should be mandatory, as well as better evacuation routes. Inspections of fire safety facilities and building materials, should be further improved and tightened, Sun said.

In the long term, experts said the safest and simplest way is to limit the height of residential buildings. In 2021, China's Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development issued a new regulation that limits the height of new residential buildings to under 80 metres, and developers of new public buildings over 100 metres must first consult with local fire departments to ensure it is able to operate safely in buildings of that height.

But Li Xiaojiang believes 80 metres is still too high for a residential building. "I believe the standard will keep being revised as time goes on," he said.★

SUPERCHARGED

With a focus on AI, high-tech and renewable energy, as well as stability in trade and diplomacy, China lays out a bold vision

Photo by VCG

Two Sessions

Conditions for Growth

Chinese policymakers double down on boosting domestic consumption and promoting technological innovation as the government strives to stabilise economic growth and withstand external turbulence

By Yu Xiaodong

3倍寿命 24个月换新
政府补贴
以旧换新 定点单位

Customers inspect e-bikes at a shop which offers trade-in subsidies, Nantong, Jiangsu Province, March 18, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

Between March 4 and 11, China's two sessions, referring to the near-concurrent annual meetings of the top legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), and the top political advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), were held in Beijing. The government set the annual growth target and the roadmap to the target, focusing on consumption, livelihoods and innovation.

In January, the International Monetary Fund raised its forecast for China's growth slightly to 4.6 percent in 2025 from the 4.5 percent forecast in October 2024, while the global economy is estimated to grow by 3.3 percent. Also in January, the World Bank revised China's growth forecast to 4.5 percent in 2025 from its 4.1 percent forecast six months earlier.

Growth Target

One of the most important events in China's political calendar, the two sessions are a platform for the Chinese government to set annual economic indicators and targets. On March 5, Premier Li Qiang delivered the yearly government work report at the opening session of the NPC, during which he set out China's 2025 economic growth goal of "around 5 percent."

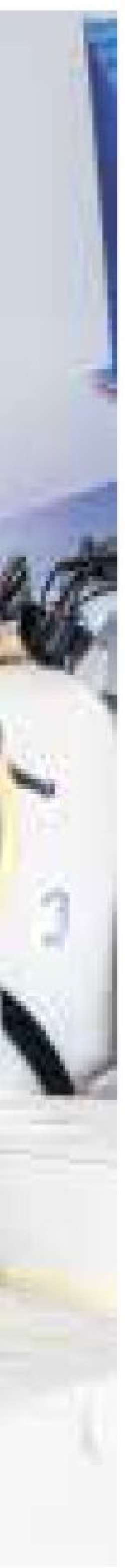
"As the increasingly complex and volatile global geopolitical and trade environment has introduced significant uncertainty into China's economic outlook, it is more challenging for China to achieve its growth target of around 5 percent this year than last," Xue Lan, a leading expert on economic policy and dean of Schwarzman College at Tsinghua University, told *ChinaReport*.

Xue noted that China's economy has shown a clear recovery across several sectors since the government deployed a package of incremental policies in September last year, which have laid a solid foundation for this year's economic development.

To boost the economy, the government pledged to adopt more proactive policies to increase the fiscal deficit to around 4 percent, 1 percentage point up from 2024. The deficit is set at 5.66 trillion yuan (US$780.9b), up by 1.6 trillion yuan (US$219b) from 2024.

The government will also issue 1.3 trillion yuan (US$179.3b) ultra-long special treasury bonds, and 4.4 trillion yuan (US$604.1b) in local government special-purpose bonds, marking new records for both with an increase of 300 billion yuan (US$41.9b) and 500 billion yuan (US$68.9b) respectively. In total, new government debt will reach 11.86 trillion yuan (US$1.6t), an increase of 2.9 trillion yuan (US$400b) over 2024, indicating a notably higher level of public spending to drive growth.

The government also vowed to adjust both the monetary aggregate and structure, including timely cuts to bank required reserve ratios and interest rates, and maintaining adequate liquidity in the market.



Tourists pick grapes at a farm, Enshi, Hubei Province, August 7, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

The government highlighted the importance of maintaining employment stability. Regarding employment as the most important factor for people's livelihoods, the government set a target of creating 12 million urban jobs to keep the surveyed urban unemployment rate at around 5.5 percent. China's unemployment rate, especially among young people, has been a major public concern in recent years. According to official data, the national urban unemployment rate for those between 16-24, excluding students, reached 18.8 percent in August and 17.6 percent in September last year, mostly due to a surge of fresh graduates, before declining to 15.7 percent in December.

In 2025, there will be 12.25 million college graduates. In addition, 30 million jobs have to be secured for rural migrant workers from former impoverished areas. This makes it a hard task to achieve the goal of creating 12 million new urban jobs and keeping the urban unemployment rate at around 5.5 percent for the year, said Wang Xiaoping, minister of Human Resources and Social Security, at a press conference on March 9.

Consumption and Livelihood

While the growth target remains the same as last year, China is placing greater emphasis on boosting consumption and improving livelihoods this year. In delivering the government work report, Premier Li Qiang called for the pursuit of "people-oriented macro policies," pledging that the government would place "a stronger economic policy focus on improving living standards and boosting consumer spending."

While boosting consumption and improving people's livelihoods have long been among China's top priorities, the difference in this year's two sessions is that the two objectives are increasingly connected.

On March 16, a few days after the two sessions concluded, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council, China's cabinet, launched an action plan to boost consumption. It includes 30 measures across eight areas, many of which are related to improving public services such as education, healthcare, childcare and eldercare.

It pledges to promote "reasonable growth" in wages and establish a sound mechanism for adjusting minimum salaries. It will push to extend social insurance to gig workers, such as delivery drivers and ride-hailing drivers. Days before the two sessions in late February, both e-commerce giant JD and lifestyle services platforms Meituan and Ele.me announced they will offer social security benefits to full-time riders. This includes endowment insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance and maternity insurance.

According to Meituan, the move was guided by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, indicating that the government has taken a more active role in pushing for better protection of gig workers.

The consumption-boosting plan also includes proposals to bring in childcare subsidies, which echoes the pledges made in the government work report delivered during the NPC session to offer childcare subsidies and free preschool education. Other measures include increasing pension payments, improving eldercare, developing the silver

Children eat at a government-funded care centre for children under 3 years old, December 19, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

economy and promoting new consumption opportunities such as cultural tourism, inbound tourism and snow and ice tourism.

"By connecting consumer spending to broader social goals like eldercare improvement, childcare support and work-life balance, the plan embeds consumption growth within China's wider development objectives, signalling that consumption is being positioned not just as an economic target but as a means to enhance quality of life," the Xinhua News Agency reported on March 16.

"While China has taken significant measures in recent years to stimulate consumer spending, such as trade-in programmes [for appliances], which have shown notable successes, there are gaps in key sectors, particularly in services like education, healthcare and eldercare," Professor Xue told *ChinaReport*.

In education, there is a stark mismatch between supply and demand for high-quality early child education, Xue added, highlighting that there is also growing demand in areas such as care for disabled seniors and home-based eldercare as well.

Innovation Strategies

During the 2024 two sessions, the Chinese leadership proposed developing "new quality productive forces" as a top priority. The strategy was in part a response to the "small yard and high fence" policy adopted by the Biden administration to cut China's access to key technologies such as advanced chip manufacturing equipment.

Advancing new quality productive forces – which emphasise high-tech, efficiency and quality while moving beyond traditional economic growth models – remains a key task in 2025.

According to the government work report, China will employ a "new system for mobilising resources nationwide" to push breakthroughs in core technologies. It also pledges to allocate "a greater share of science and technology expenditure" to basic research.

According to Xue, the subtle shifts in rhetoric adopted in this year's government work report regarding science and technology innovation policies indicate that as rising external pressures pose greater challenges in addressing bottlenecks in key technologies, China has renewed its emphasis on harnessing the strengths of its system to consolidate resources and overcome these constraints.

"The Chinese government also recognises that breakthroughs in fundamental research from 'zero to one' cannot be achieved in the short term," Xue said, "As a result, the central government will place more emphasis on ensuring that major scientific and technological projects serve the strategic needs of the country."

Another major change in the rhetoric on research and development in the government work report is that it pledges to "fully leverage the pacesetting role of leading high-tech enterprises to bolster enterprise-led collaboration between industries, universities and research institutes," and to "provide institutional support for enterprises to participate in national decision-making on scientific and technological innovation and undertake major science and technology projects."

According to Xue, this represents a significant shift in the decision-making approach to national technological innovation. "In the past, major national scientific and technological projects were primarily led by national research institutions and universities. But as many bottlenecks are arising in the process of industrial development and practical application, it is becoming increasingly difficult for national entities to solve these problems alone," Xue said. "Now, it is necessary for enterprises to play a leading role in national technological innovation.

Xue noted while emphasising the "leading role of technological backbone enterprises," the report makes no distinction between State-owned enterprises and private enterprises, with more focus on the enterprise's own strength and leading position. This is a clear signal and a major shift, which is also in line with the central government's support for private enterprises.

Job hunters browse vacancies at a job fair, Xiong'an, Hebei Province, February 3, 2023
(Photo by VCG)

On February 17, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a high-level symposium for private enterprises for the first time in seven years. President Xi met with dozens of representatives of private enterprises, the majority of whom were from technology companies, including telecommunication giant Huawei, battery manufacturer CATL, AI firm DeepSeek, and smartphone and electric vehicle manufacturer Xiaomi. Analysts believe that it indicates China is placing renewed emphasis on the development of private tech enterprises.

During the symposium, Xi said that the government is "unwavering" in its efforts to consolidate and develop both the public sector and the non-public sector economies. This was reiterated in the government work report.

Foreign Investment

This year's government work report also highlighted the importance of attracting foreign investment. Stressing that "all market access restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector were lifted," the report pledged to "ensure national treatment for foreign-funded enterprises in fields such as access to production factors, licence application, standards setting and government procurement" in order to "make China a favoured destination for foreign investment."

In the past couple of months, Chinese stocks, especially tech firms, have become a hot prospect for many foreign investors. Fuelled by the boom in China's tech companies, the Hong Kong Tech Index surged by 36 percent in the past three months as of March 20.

Chinese tech firms have been given various nicknames, such as "Six Little Dragons," referring to DeepSeek, Unitree Robotics, DEEP Robotics, BrainCo, Game Science and Manycore Tech, and the "Terrific Ten," referring to the more established firms of Alibaba, Tencent, Meituan, Xiaomi, BYD, JD.com, NetEase, Baidu, Geely and SMIC.

In February, several leading international financial institutions, including Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and Deutsche Bank, expressed bullish views on Chinese tech shares, citing their AI advances.

On February 25, China's Ministry of Commerce and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the country's top economic planner, released an action plan to stabilise foreign investment that includes 20 measures.

According to a report released by the American Chamber of Commerce(AmCham) in South China on February 26, 76 percent of the 316 foreign companies AmCham surveyed said they intend to reinvest in China, with a notable 74 percent of the US companies planning reinvestments, up 11 percentage points year-on-year.

On March 16, officials from the NDRC and the Commerce Ministry arranged a special meeting with representatives from international companies, including Tesla, AstraZeneca and SoftBank, along with a diverse array of industries such as finance and investment, biopharmaceuticals, automotive manufacturing and tourism.

During the meeting, Jiang Yi, director of the policy research office of the NDRC, said that China will soon release the 2025 version of the catalogue of industries that encourage foreign investment, which will include new sectors such as advanced manufacturing, modern services, high-tech industries and environmental protection.

Stressing that China's development journey has been "extraordinary" in the past year, showing strong resilience and vitality in the economic sector, Jiang said that China's commitment to "deepening reform and expanding high-standard opening up remains unchanged and will not change."

For many analysts, this year's two sessions has inspired greater confidence in China's economic prospects. "Generally speaking, China's economy has demonstrated strong resilience and shown notable advantages across various sectors," Xue said. "With strong macroeconomic policy support, we should remain confident in China's economic development this year."★

Two Sessions

Certainty amid Chaos

China's top diplomat pledges that the country will serve as a stabilising force in an increasingly unpredictable world

By Yu Xiaodong

On March 11, China's annual two sessions, the country's most important annual political event, concluded in Beijing. As a platform for the Chinese government to set up economic targets and policy directions for the year, the meetings primarily focus on domestic issues, such as economic development and social policies.

However, with the Trump administration's return to office in January and its unconventional approach to global affairs having brought more uncertainty to the global economic and political landscape – including escalating tensions in China-US relations, the Chinese leadership has drawn increased attention for its foreign policy rhetoric. How China navigates this shifting geopolitical landscape was a key focus for China watchers during this year's two sessions.

On March 7, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), held a 90-minute press conference on the sidelines of the third session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC). His remarks attracted considerable attention.

Speaking on a range of topics and answering questions from both domestic and international journalists, Wang articulated China's perspective on the shifting world order, portraying China as a responsible global power and a stabilising force in a world that has been upended by the Trump administration.

China-US Relations

The US imposed additional 10 percent tariffs on almost all imports from China in early February. On March 3, the day before the two sessions kicked off, the additional tariffs were raised to 20 percent. The US accused China of failing to curb the flow of the opioid fentanyl into the US.

In both cases, China responded swiftly

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (centre, waving), also a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), prepares to speak on China's diplomatic policies and foreign relations at a press conference during the third session of the 14th National People's Congress, March 7, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

with retaliatory measures. On March 4, China announced the imposition of additional tariffs of 10-15 percent on certain American agricultural and food products. It also announced immediate export controls on 15 US entities in the defence industry and added 10 US companies to its Unreliable Entity List.

The same day, the Chinese embassy in the US released a statement on X, formerly Twitter, stressing that the US government should take responsibility for its fentanyl crisis rather than "smearing and shifting blame to China."

The statement and the immediate response signalled a tougher stance from China towards the US compared to Trump's first term.

When asked how China will engage differently with the current Trump administration compared to the first one, Wang echoed the sentiment conveyed in the Chinese embassy's statement. "No country should fantasise that it can suppress China and maintain good relations with China at the same time," Wang said. "Such a two-faced approach is not good for the stability of bilateral relations or for building mutual trust."

On the issue of fentanyl, Wang stressed that China has put in place "the toughest and most comprehensive narcotics policy in today's world," and had put all fentanyl-related substances under strict controls following the US's request in 2019, the first country in the world to do so. Reiterating that the problem must be confronted and resolved by the US, Wang said that "the US should not return good with evil or even impose arbitrary tariffs," adding "no responsible major country should do that."

Citing the Chinese saying "If one's action fails, look for the reason within oneself," Wang urged the US to reflect on what it achieved from its tariff and trade wars in the past years. "Has its trade deficit widened or narrowed? Has its manufacturing become more competitive or less competitive? Has the US inflation gone up or down? Has the life of its people got better or worse?" Wang asked.

"China-US business relations are based on two-way and reciprocal interactions. Cooperation will bring about mutual benefit, and China will definitely take countermeasures in response to arbitrary pressure," Wang added.

Noting that China "never provokes and will not be intimidated by provocations," Wang said that "no maximum pressure, threat or blackmail can undermine the unity of the 1.4 billion people or stop our historic stride towards the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Regarding the US's high-tech curbs on China, Wang quoted a Chinese verse: "No mountain can stop the flow of a mighty river." Citing China's technological advances over recent years, including its space programme and AI model DeepSeek, Wang said that China's drive to become a science and technology powerhouse is unstoppable.

Stabilising Force

Speaking at an event laying out China's overall diplomatic approach, Wang's rhetoric went beyond the bilateral relationship. In essence, Wang presents China as a responsible, predictable and stable global power in stark contrast to what many perceive as a bullying, chaotic and hypocritical US.

In answering a question about Trump's "America First" policy raised by CNN, Wang warned, without referring to the US explicitly, that the obsession over the so-called "position of strength," a concept raised by both the Biden administration and the Trump administration, would lead the world to the "law of the jungle" again.

"Smaller and weaker countries would bear the brunt first, and international norms and order would take a body blow," Wang said. Stressing that "a big country should honour its international obligations and fulfill its due responsibilities" rather than put selfish interests before principles and bully the weak, Wang said that "China stands firm on the side of international justice and resolutely opposes power politics and hegemony."

"A saying in the West goes, 'There are no eternal friends, only permanent interests,' " Wang said, paraphrasing a quote attributed to former UK prime minister

Top: A scholar from Africa experiences the local Wuzhou pottery kiln technique at the 2024 China-Africa Trade and Culture Forum held in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, November 8, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Middle: An exhibition on ancient Greek civilisation opens at Beijing Capital Museum, November 20, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Bottom: Customers look at items at a trade fair for Chinese, Japanese and South Korean products in Qingdao, Shandong Province, June 21-23, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Lord Palmerston (1784-1865). "But we in China believe that friends should be permanent and we should pursue common interests," Wang added.

In response to another question about the role China intends to play in the world, Wang said that as "certainty is becoming a scarce resource" in a "changing and turbulent world," China will provide certainty to this uncertain world. Emphasising that the choices of major countries will determine "the trajectory of our times" and shape the future of the world, Wang said China will "stand firm on the right side of history and on the side of human progress."

Responding to a question about the danger that the UN-based post-WWII world order is facing, Wang said that China is a founder and beneficiary of the post-WWII international order. "Naturally, we are an advocate and builder of it as well. We have no intention to start all over again, nor do we support any country's attempt to overturn the current order," Wang added.

In an apparent veiled criticism of the US, Wang said that "major countries in particular should take the lead in upholding integrity, embracing the rule of law and opposing double standard and selective application. Still less should they resort to bullying, monopoly, trickery or extortion."

Global South

Wang also highlighted the importance of the Global South, which Wang said "holds the key to bringing stability to the world and making it a better place."

"The hallmark of our era is the prominent, growing strength of the Global South," Wang added. Highlighting the upcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit, the BRICS Summit and the G20 Summit, which will be hosted by China, Brazil and South Africa respectively in 2025, Wang called on countries of the Global South to "speak in one voice to the world, safeguard our common interests and steadily increase

A concert to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the establishment of China-US diplomatic relations is held at the Chinese Embassy in the US, Washington, DC, August 9, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Visitors browse "The Inca and their Tawantinsuyu – the Land of Four Quarters" exhibition at Nanshan Museum, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, October 11, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

our representation and voice in global governance."

Wang pledged that China will continue to expand global partnerships and "write a new chapter of the Global South seeking strength through unity."

He also addressed China's relations with India, a heavyweight Global South country and a member of the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which also includes Australia and Japan. In the past few years, India has been locked in a territorial dispute with China that has paralysed cooperation between the world's two most populous countries.

Noting that China-India relations have made positive strides since Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met in Kazan, Russia during the 16th BRICS Summit in October 2024, Wang said that a "cooperative pas de deux of the dragon and the elephant" is the only right choice for the two countries.

"China and India have a shared task to accelerate our countries' development and revitalisation. There is every reason for us to support each other rather than undercut each other, work with each other rather than guard against each other," Wang added.

On China's relationship with Russia against the backdrop of renewed talks between the US and Russia, Wang said the two countries have forged "a mature, resilient and stable" relationship that "will not be swayed by any turn of events, let alone be subject to interference by any third party."

On China's relations with the EU, Wang said that China remains confident in it as a "trustworthy partner." However, Wang did not directly answer a question from Bloomberg on the possibility of China sending peace-keeping troops to Ukraine, and emphasised that China has continued to advocate for peace talks to "create conditions and build consensus for resolving the crisis." "The negotiating table is where the conflict ends and peace starts," Wang said.

Wang did not make any surprising comments or hint at any major policy changes during the press conference. However, Wang's press conference apparently sends a message that China is more confident and resolute in advancing its diplomatic policies and China is ready to inject more stability and certainty to the world. ★

Silver Economy

Write of Passage

Memoir ghostwriting is becoming a trendy business as more seniors seek to document their life stories. However, the market's future development remains a blank page

By Wang Yu and Xu Ming

Liu Dianqing donned his army uniform the day his self-published memoir arrived, saluting the deliverer with solemn respect. The red cover features a photograph of the 97-year-old in his military attire. The sight of it reduced Liu to tears.

"I'm so happy my life story is told in this book," Liu said. Originally from Henan Province, Liu joined the army at 17 in 1946 and spent the latter half of his life in Sichuan Province. The memoir gave his daughter a glimpse into experiences he rarely discussed.

Liu is one of many seniors recording their lives in memoir form. In recent years, memoir ghostwriting has become a business opportunity, driven by a growing awareness among families to preserve the memories of older relatives. On lifestyle app RedNote, many influencers share their experiences of writing memoirs for seniors. Some have begun selling training courses on how to write them.

This emerging market is currently dominated by small businesses or freelancers looking for extra income. Costs range from 10,000-80,000 yuan (US$1,370-10,900), depending on the book's length and complexity.

By the end of 2023, China's population aged 60 and over reached 296 million, accounting for 21.1 percent of the total population. Many see promise in memoir ghostwriting as part of China's growing silver economy, which caters to the needs of an ageing society. However, despite its apparent potential, difficulty in attracting clients and a low input-output ratio hinder growth. According to the writers interviewed, building the market will be a novel endeavour.

Preserving Memories

Almost everyone involved in memoir ghostwriting who spoke to *ChinaReport* expressed a common regret: they realised they knew far too little about their parents or grandparents and lamented not having recorded their life stories sooner.

When an elderly family member becomes seriously or terminally ill, their children often feel an urgent need to preserve their memories, creating demand for professional writers who can capture their life stories.

Ding Man, a 36-year-old memoir

Photo by VCG

ghostwriter, began his career by helping a friend whose father had become seriously ill and urgently needed a memoirist. For many seniors, the desire to write a memoir is deeply personal. Han Meng, a memoir writer on Douyin, shared an experience of interviewing a retired official to document his career achievements. Yet, as the conversation began, the man chose to focus on his youth and childhood instead. "He witnessed significant societal changes," Han said. "When someone just listened, he felt encouraged to reflect on his past."

"A person's work experience needs to be understood in the broader context of their life," said Chen Xin, a professor at Shanghai Normal University. While working at Zhejiang University's public history research centre, Chen helped document the achievements of the school's professors over the age of 85. He realised that merely talking about work made it hard to build a meaningful connection. The research centre ultimately created oral histories for each professor.

According to Ding Man, some seniors commission memoirs as they approach retirement to reflect on their professional contributions, while others hope to relay their journey to their children and grandchildren. For instance, Ding's landlords – retired professors in Beijing – commissioned a 200,000-word memoir for their grandchildren who were born and raised overseas. They hoped the book would help their descendants understand who they were.

Ding Longlong, a 27-year-old from Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, has been working in the memoir-writing business for about six months. He told *ChinaReport* that most of his clients are highly educated, such as retired teachers, civil servants, veterans and successful entrepreneurs. His team has completed nine memoirs so far, including one for Zhao Mingcai, a comrade of Lei Feng (1940-1962), a soldier and icon of selflessness and dedication in China. Ding and his team created Zhao's memoir free of charge.

"It's common for renowned scholars and political figures to write memoirs, as they've often played roles in major historical events," Chen said. "But it's a new trend for ordinary people to be aware of and capable of writing their own history."

Chen attributed this trend to the reduced cost of recording and sharing stories in the age of the internet and new media. "If someone can't write, they can record their stories or hire someone to do it for them, provided their financial situation allows," Chen said.

He noted that most memoirs are intended for family and friends rather than public audiences. "The greatest value of these memoirs lies in strengthening family bonds and fostering intergenerational connections," Chen said.

Beyond the book itself, the process of creating a memoir offers emotional benefits. Several writers observed that the act of listening and offering companionship during interviews provides comfort to elderly clients, especially those living far from their children.

Ding Longlong previously worked in training caregivers for disabled seniors, an experience that made him acutely aware of the elderly's strong desire to share their life stories. "They feel better when someone sits down and listens," Ding said. "The interview process helps them review their life experiences, which is therapeutic." He added that interviewers with psychological or medical expertise could provide additional emotional support, offering a potential avenue to enhance the service.

Emerging Market

The business of writing memoirs has emerged alongside the expansion of China's ageing population. Zhu Ziyi, the owner of a writing agency, sees enormous potential in industries catering to seniors. Before turning to memoir writing, Zhu organised fashion shows for elderly women to participate in, which came to a halt in 2020 due to the pandemic. Memoir writing became his fallback, and he managed to turn a profit in the first year.

Ding Longlong, who studied nursing in college, also discovered the demand for memoirs through his work in eldercare. After graduation, he joined an eldercare company and trained caregivers for disabled seniors. His frequent interactions with elderly clients clued him into the potential market.

Memoir writers come from diverse backgrounds. They include professionals from eldercare-related industries, white-collar workers seeking part-time opportunities, influencers and other entrepreneurs looking to cash in on the trend.

According to Han Xiner, co-founder of a writing agency, many who failed to transition successfully from the education and training sector to social media after China's "double reduction" policy – which aimed to reduce children's homework and academic burdens by cutting after-school tutoring – have since turned to memoir writing.

In December 2024, a training class for memoir ghostwriting in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province welcomed a new batch of students. Despite its high cost at 50,000 yuan (US$6,860) per person, the course attracted participants from as far afield as Shanghai and Shandong and Zhejiang provinces, *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported.

Li Tie, CEO of the company offering the course, said the first student enrolled in early November, and by the end of December, they had trained around 60 students. "The ageing society is one reason for the boom," Li told *Southern Metropolis Daily*. "Another is the growing awareness of people wanting to express themselves."

Han noted that the quality of the work depends on the writer's skill and approach. Some memoirs attempt to transform life stories into legendary tales, often at the expense of factual accuracy, while others prioritise authenticity and align personal narratives with public records.

An interviewee who employs a team of writers told *ChinaReport* that the market has segmented to cater to different types of clients. "Some teams target high-end customers who view memoirs as historical records for their families, focusing on authenticity, legacy and readability. Others cater to clients more concerned with presentation, offering polished packaging with less emphasis on writing quality," the interviewee said, requesting anonymity.

The production process differs too. High-end customers, often well-educated, typically have higher expectations. Writing teams invest considerable time and resources to produce polished, professional memoirs.

AI is increasingly being used in the memoir-writing industry, though opinions differ on its role. Currently, AI is primarily utilised in the writing phase, especially in structuring the collected stories chronologically.

Li's company, however, incorporates AI throughout the process. Before interviews, AI generates tailored questions based on basic client information, such as birthplace and family details. After conducting interviews, AI assists in creating follow-up questions to deepen the narrative, *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported.

Han Xiner revealed that AI-focused companies saw the market potential as early as 2022 and approached her agency to cooperate. Some have collaborated on services like creating "digital twins" for elderly clients, preserving their voices and personalities in digital form, Han said.

Writing the Future

On Douyin and RedNote, many posts share success stories from the emerging industry. Some claim to earn 30,000 yuan (US$4,120) per memoir and over 100,000 yuan (US$13,730) annually. Such posts often portray memoir writing as an easy and lucrative job.

However, many in the industry say this is misleading. "It's true that writing a 20,000-word memoir can earn about 10,000 yuan (US$1,373), but the entire process, from finding customers, interviewing, writing, editing and design to delivering the final book, takes at least four to six weeks," Ding Longlong wrote in an article on his WeChat account. He concluded that despite the seemingly high pay, memoir writing is far from "quick money."

Several interviewees in the industry said that both the elderly and their children are more inclined to invest in the future, prioritising the next generation.

Zhao Yuxi, a memoir ghostwriter with six years of experience from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, told ifeng.com that out of Chengdu's three million people aged over 60, only one in 1,000 to 10,000 would consider paying for a memoir. To make the service more accessible, Zhao reduced his prices by 60 percent to a range of 10,000 to 30,000 yuan (US$1,370-4,120). Similarly, Zhu Ziyi keeps his pricing near cost, at around 28,000 yuan (US$3,840), to cater to a broader audience.

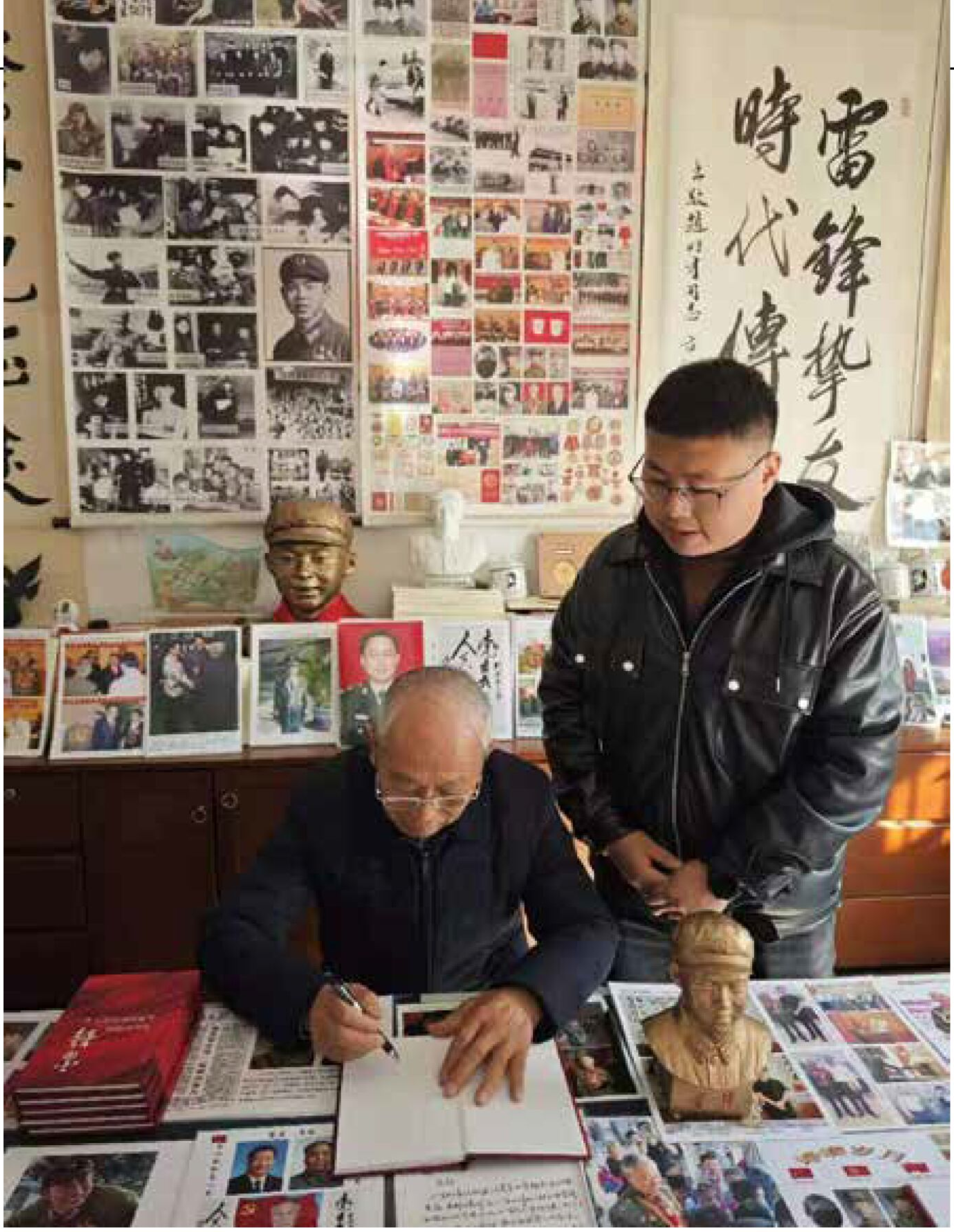
When he started his business, Zhu tried promoting his services at nursing homes and exhibition centres. "Most elderly people have a low sense of self-worth. They don't think they are worth writing about, nor are they willing to spend the money," Zhu said. He later shifted focus to marketing directly to their children.

Those already engaged in eldercare often find easier success. Ding Longlong said his previous job provided valuable connections and resources. For instance, he landed the Zhao Mingcai memoir because his previous employer once provided services to Zhao's family.

However, he has yet to bring in a stable income, and his team members all have day jobs. Ding Longlong cautions newcomers without connections in the industry against jumping all-in.

Chen Xin emphasised the need for professionalism to make memoir ghostwriting a sustainable industry. "When clients struggle to recount their stories clearly due to memory issues, it's essential to balance authenticity and readability," Chen said.

As most writers freelance rather than register companies, customers have few options to verify their qualifications. "There are no norms or regulations. Everything depends on the writer's ethics and skills," Ding Longlong added.



Top: Ding Longlong interviews Zhao Mingcai, a comrade of hero soldier Lei Feng (1940-1962), at Zhao's home (Photo Courtesy of the Interviewee)

Above: The editor (back row centre) and author (back row right) of a memoir ghostwriting agency with two satisfied customers (Photo Courtesy of the Interviewee)

Chen proposed that scholars and professionals should guide the industry's growth. In the future, standard training could cover areas like social psychology, digital humanities and media. "Besides writing memoirs, you can also shoot documentaries. The market could be expanded in this way," Chen said.

Ding Longlong suggested expanding into different categories, including chronicling family histories, love stories and marriage. Services could also integrate AI and AR technology, such as adding QR codes to physical books that link to photos and videos.

For example, in Zhao Mingcai's memoir, readers can scan to watch an AI-generated GIF that shows Zhao and Lei Feng embracing.

Despite its potential, the memoir-writing industry remains in its infancy. Zhao Yuxi likened its development to that of wedding photography, which grew into a mature and profitable sector. "Currently, the industry is still finding its footing, with many business models only beginning to take shape," Zhao told *Southern Metropolis Daily* in December 2024.

Han Xiner agrees, saying that her agency is struggling to keep up with orders. "The main components, such as interviewing and writing, are time-intensive and hard to standardise because everyone's experiences and memories are unique," Han said. "This business is inherently not scalable."

Ding Man believes the market needs more time to develop, but remains optimistic given China's large population. However, he pointed out a trade-off. "If you want to raise prices and cater to customers with greater spending power, you need to meet their expectations in knowledge and education background. But if you cater to ordinary customers, you'll only make 3,000 yuan (US$410) for 10,000 words. The input-output ratio is much lower than my main job," Ding admitted. For now, he plans to "wait and see."★

Collectables

Card Sharks

Using clever tactics and the allure of rare finds, the thrill of livestreamed collectable card sales is pulling in bigger crowds, especially minors. However, experts warn that these sales mimic gambling, yet operate with little oversight to protect young buyers

By Meng Qian and Xie Ying

MALTESE TICKET
冷战和好

It was 3 am, but Wang Ke still had over 1,000 viewers. She is known on short-video platform Douyin for her unboxing livestreams of collectible cards.

This session, the cards were *My Little Pony*, a 40-year-old US animation franchise popular in China since the early 2010s.

Despite having already streamed for eight hours, Wang was energetic, tearing into multiple card packs at once. A single buyer had purchased several hundred packs in the hopes of completing a set of rare cards, and her chat was amped up for it.

She quickly picked out the rarer finds and placed them on a display shelf. Ordinary cards were tossed into a box. Within seconds, she was back to ripping open more for her customers.

Collectible cards are big business in China. A common form of merchandising for popular IPs, fans of franchises from *Harry Potter* to *Ultraman* eagerly buy "mystery packs" hoping to score rare cards. The most prized cards often have holographic finishes, laser engravings or unique serial numbers.

My Little Pony, *Harry Potter* and many other popular IPs are licenced to China's leading card makers such as Kayou and Card.Fun. However, as companies continue to introduce new rare card varieties and lower the odds of obtaining them, collecting a full set has become increasingly expensive.

Collectors interviewed by *ChinaReport* admit they are drawn to the gambling-like experience of buying mystery packs, particularly during livestreamed unboxings where cards are revealed in real time and hosts gamify the entire process.

These tactics spark greater concern when children are targeted. As the industry expands, experts and parents point out that regulatory gaps and weak enforcement of laws protecting minors leave them holding none of the right cards.

'Dopamine Rush'

Back in Wang's livestream, anticipation was growing as she opened more packs for her customers. "You guys might want to grab some packs, because a Super Collector card is coming soon," Wang teased on her chat.

Moments later, she unwrapped what everyone was waiting for: a coveted Super Collector – the rarest tier – worth approximately 1,000 yuan (US$143) on the resale market.

Top: A livestreaming host unpacks cards for audiences, Hangzhou, December 26, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Left: Chinese Luckin Coffee and Line Dog, a cartoon IP created by South Korean illustrator "moonlab_studio" jointly launch a love-themed collectible card product, Shanghai, August 21, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Right: A primary school student buys *Nezha 2* cards, Zhengzhou, Henan Province, February 14, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

The chat exploded with excitement, with viewers congratulating the buyer on their luck.

Livestream hosts like Wang have honed their sales strategies, using interactive games to drive engagement. Some games offer bonus packs for pulling special cards, while others encourage multiple buyers to compete by purchasing individual cards from the same box to see who gets the rarest. These mechanics, coupled with charismatic hosts, keep viewers and buyers tuned in.

Data from Douyin shows that over the three months up to the end of November 2024, Wang has livestreamed 70 times, averaging 10 hours per session, with each stream attracting 2,000-3,000 viewers. Her daily sales exceed 50,000 yuan (US$7,150), and her steady audience includes dedicated fans who are well-versed in card collecting and flush with cash.

Another veteran livestream seller, Yu Bai, said these streams became popular two years ago. "In the beginning, hosts simply sold cards without much strategy, relying on high profit margins. Now, experienced hosts invent their own games to boost engagement and keep sales climbing."

According to Yu, these tactics keep audiences hooked. "People are naturally curious, and livestreams offer emotional highs. When someone pulls a rare card, the whole chat cheers for them. It's an instant dopamine rush."

A 2023 market report by Chinese research firm iResearch attributed the growth of card collecting to the large fan base, emotional investment and entertainment value, with the added excitement of unboxing.

Essentially, livestreaming has turned card collecting into a spectator sport.

"When hosts introduce new sales games, they blend commerce with entertainment," said Cui Lili, director of the E-commerce Institute at Shanghai

University of Finance and Economics. "In many ways, livestreaming card unboxing functions like a highly engaging, addictive game."

Zhang Shule, a senior gaming industry analyst, agrees. "Livestream card sales are straightforward and instantaneous. Buyers don't have to wait for delivery to find out what they've received, making the process even more enticing."

"It's similar to online gaming," Zhang added.

Playing the Odds

In the livestreaming industry, collectible cards are seen as a fast way to make money. Online advertisements for training sellers promise potential earnings of 30,000 yuan (US$4,300) per month, with some even claiming it to be a high-profit, low-cost business that requires only a mobile phone and a computer.

"Among [IP] products, cards have the lowest production costs since most are made in a standard size, enabling mass production with a single template," Yi Hui, manager of the Chinese International Comic Festival (CICF) Expo, told *ChinaReport*. "The more a producer makes, the lower the cost. And rare cards just mean some additional designs and materials," he added.

Cards are a cheaper alternative to collectible figurines, another big industry in China targeting kids and young people that relies heavily on "mystery box" marketing. Compared to 59-89 yuan (US$8-13) each per figurine, collectible cards are priced around 10-20 yuan (US$1-3) per pack, each containing two to five standard-sized cards.

However, as card collections often include multiple series of rare cards with varying drop rates, completing a full set is much more costly than having a full set of collectible figurines.

During the Spring Festival, Jenny Huang, a *Harry Potter* fan in Shanghai, spent 20 yuan (US$3) on a pack of *Harry Potter* cards, only to find that it contained just a single oversized card.

"It's unbelievable. Although it's bigger and shinier, it's still just paper. I thought there would be at least two cards in the pack," she told *ChinaReport*.

Huang's card was an ordinary one. According to the packaging, buyers have a 1-in-15 chance of getting a rare card, and a 1-in-60 chance at a "super-rare" one.

This means that if Huang wanted to get a super-rare card, she might have to spend at least 1,200 yuan (US$171) on 60 packs. To collect all four super-rare cards, she would likely have to spend much more due to the high odds of getting duplicates.

Huang's odds are good compared to other popular IPs. For example, in leading card producer Kayou's newly launched collection for animated film *Nezha 2*, the rarest card – which bears director Jiaozi's autograph and a limited collection number – has a drop rate of just 1 in 370,286 packs. The second-rarest has a rate of 1 in 14,338, and the third-rarest, 1 in 2,131.

For the average player, completing a full set of rare cards is virtually impossible.

While some super-rare cards are listed for high prices on resale markets,

Sugar crush!
MY LITTLE PONY
LOVE

Top: A mother tidies the collectible cards and other products her child has amassed, Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, October 31, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Above: *My Little Pony* cards are prominently displayed at a shop in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province (Photo by Xie Ying) the overall market remains small. Many high prices are artificially inflated by scalpers, and most ordinary cards hold little to no resale value.

Yet, despite the low odds of obtaining rare cards, buyers continue to pin their hopes on the next pack.

Yu Bai believes that livestreaming sales of collectible cards have not peaked since the industry has yet to produce a celebrity livestreamer with at least one million followers.

According to the iResearch report, China's card collection market reached 10 billion yuan (US$1.4b) in 2022 and is projected to grow to 27.7 billion yuan (US$3.9b) in 2025.

"Livestreaming sales have significantly boosted the growth of the card collection industry since the lottery aspect fuels impulsive purchases," Yi Hui with the Expo told *ChinaReport*. "Many buyers will eventually realise they've accumulated boxes of items and then become tired of it," he added.

Pack Mentality

Mo Li, a collector in Shandong Province, experienced this realisation firsthand. She told *ChinaReport* that she spent over 10,000 yuan (US$1,400) on cards in her first week of collecting. It wasn't until she received over 200 packages, weighing about 50 kilograms in total, that she realised the extent of her spending.

"That week, I was completely immersed in livestreaming rooms, playing games and buying cards. I barely slept, just two to three hours a day. I got more excited when I won and refused to quit when I lost. I couldn't control myself," she said.

For minors, such impulsive spending can be even harder to resist.

Bai Lang, a father in Sichuan Province, was shocked to discover her school-aged daughter had used his phone to spend 80,000 yuan (US$11,400) on cards, filling five large boxes hidden at home. All of them were purchased from livestreams.

"My daughter is well-behaved and does well in school, so we didn't monitor her too closely. She told me card collecting was popular at school, but I had no idea she had been buying them online for over six months," Bai said. "She wanted rare cards, saying they were valuable on the resale market, but she never got one. She was addicted, like being trapped in an online game," he added.

Bai took legal action. He was able to recover 30,000 yuan (US$4,300) that was spent on virtual gifts for livestreaming hosts, but the rest is difficult to reclaim, as he would need to file lawsuits against 20 different livestreamers – which would be too costly.

Although China's Civil Law forbids selling mystery-box products to children under 8 years old and restricts sales to older minors without parental consent, You Yunting, a lawyer at Shanghai DeBund Law Offices, noted that parents may still have to compensate sellers if returned items are devalued.

To avoid legal liability, livestreaming rooms post disclaimers stating that minors are prohibited from purchasing cards. Some require buyers to type in the chat: "I am an adult and agree not to request a refund" before purchasing.

But Bai argued that sellers have no way to verify buyers' ages. Cards are also often found in school-adjacent convenience stores, sold next to candy and toys. Few shops refuse to sell cards to children.

In July 2024, a report by China Media Group highlighted how common it is for minors to spend hundreds or thousands of yuan on livestream card sales. That same month, China Central Television (CCTV) criticised Kayou for allowing minors to purchase cards. Their investigative report revealed that many primary school students were hooked on collecting *My Little Pony* cards, one of Kayou's leading products.

CCTV also found that Kayou's shops and apps lacked restrictions on minors' purchases.

Further, the report revealed that Kayou's IPO application in Hong Kong was rejected for failing to submit materials on several issues, including data security for minors. According to Kayou's IPO statement, card sales accounted for about 85-95 percent of its revenue from 2021 to 2023, with a net profit margin of approximately 70 percent.

Yao Jinju, a law professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, told *ChinaReport* that authorities should refine regulations to help prevent minors from developing unhealthy obsessions.

"We must be aware that such sales can lead to excessive spending by minors, especially as card collecting has become a popular social activity driven by novelty and excitement," Yao said.

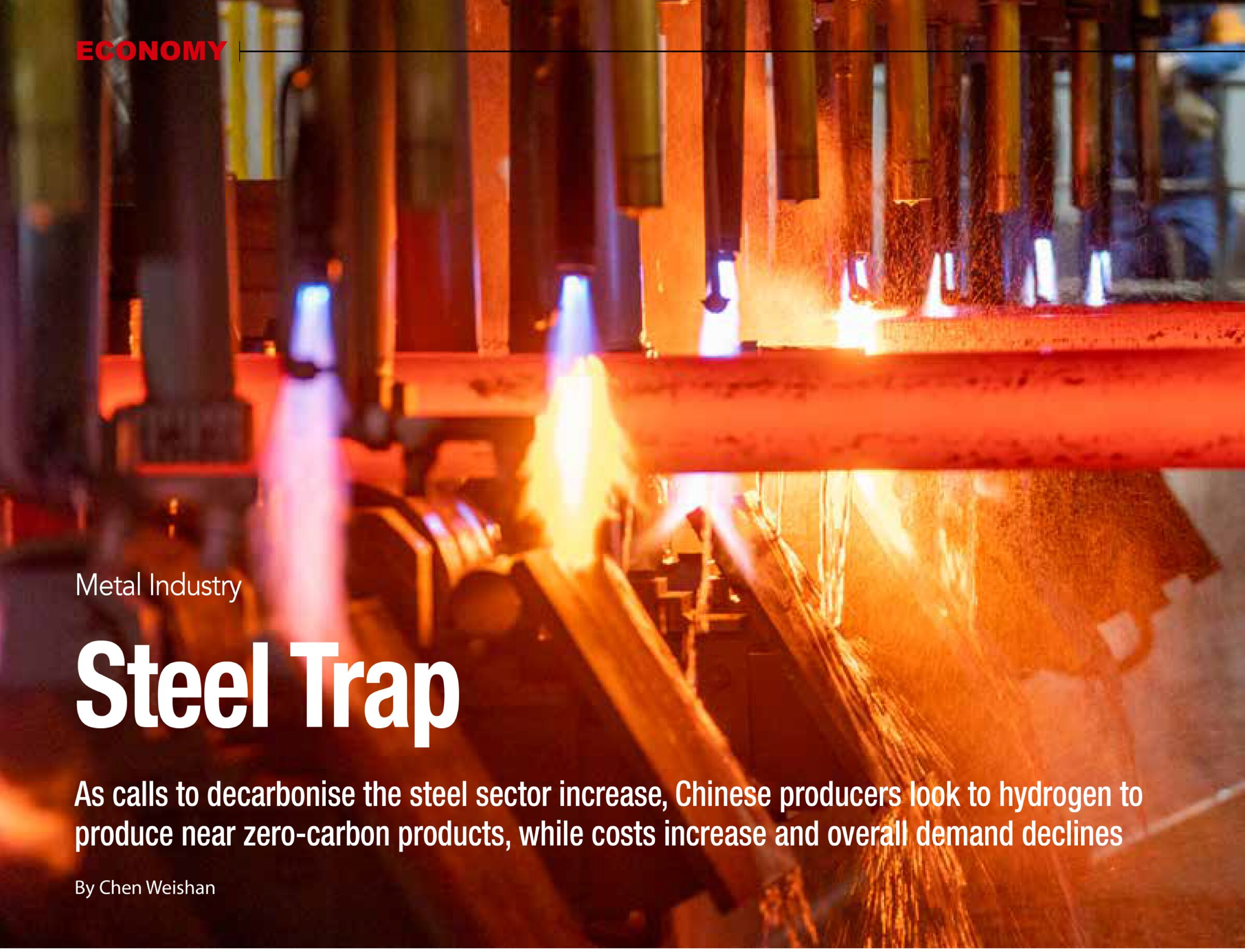
Lawyer You believes that preventing these obsessions is not only the responsibility of producers and sellers but also of livestream platforms.

"These platforms use algorithms that recommend similar livestream rooms once they detect a viewer's interest, which can encourage excessive engagement," You said. He noted that certain games featured in livestreams push buyers to spend more, sometimes bordering on gambling.

In February 2024, Douyin issued a notice targeting gambling-like games in card collection livestreams. The platform banned practices designed to entice buyers into spending more, such as offering additional card packs for those who pull specific cards or rewarding buyers who obtain rare cards. However, these restrictions have reportedly been poorly enforced.

"Although there are some government bans, they are not well implemented," You said.

"In some other countries and regions, certain sales games are strictly prohibited as a kind of addiction prevention measure, rules that China still lacks."★



Metal Industry

Steel Trap

As calls to decarbonise the steel sector increase, Chinese producers look to hydrogen to produce near zero-carbon products, while costs increase and overall demand declines

By Chen Weishan

The steel sector in China is one of the biggest sources of carbon emissions, second only to coal-fired power plants, and now its customers, both domestic and foreign, are putting pressure on the industry to become greener. As the auto industry, especially in the electric vehicle sector, booms in China, some steelmakers are switching technologies.

Decarbonisation of the industry is important to achieve China's dual carbon peaking and neutrality goals. Since 2021, China has put forward a series of policies encouraging reductions in energy consumption and emissions, and the adoption of new technology and more efficient processes in steelmaking.

According to 2022 figures from the World Steel Association, China's steel sector emits about 1.8 billion tons of CO2, around 15 percent of overall emissions.

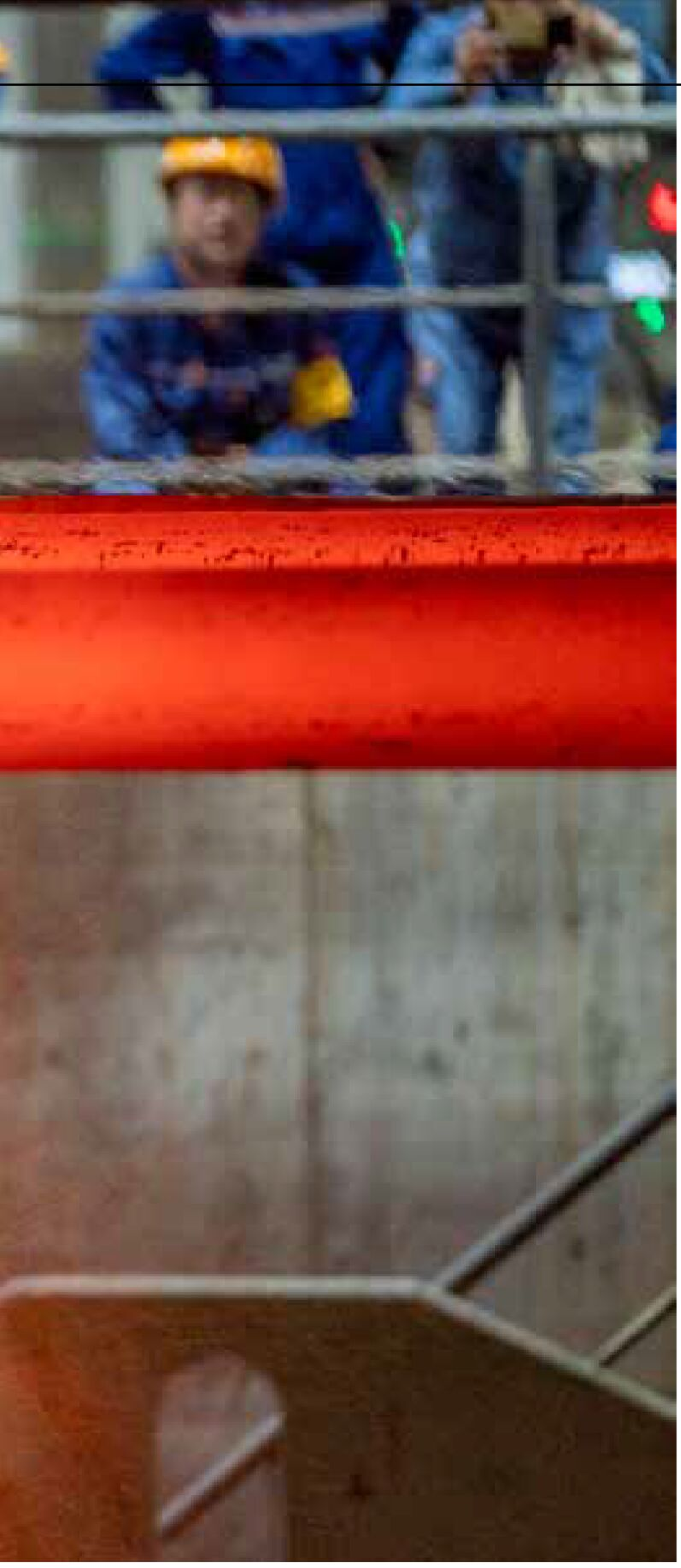
In August 2024, China suspended its policy for steel capacity swaps, meaning that to control total production capacity, if a new steel plant is built, an old one with the same or more capacity must be closed. The policy started in 2015 in a bid to address overcapacity. Even though the policy was not designed for carbon reduction, it had an effect due to more efficient plants with modern technology coming online.

The suspension is expected to be followed by new policies to better guide the industry's green transition, as there is more demand for low-carbon and zero-carbon steel products due to China's emissions reduction goals.

Steel companies still face challenges in balancing revenue and production, particularly at a time when the entire industry is facing a downturn. More efforts need to be made in boosting demand for low-carbon steel and green financing to help steel companies reduce the costs of transition, interviewed analysts said.

Lowered Demand

China's steel sector has been plagued by overcapacity and insufficient demand for some years. By the end of 2024, its



Xinyu Iron and Steel Group tests its newly upgraded electric arc furnace to produce greener steel, Xinyu, Jiangxi Province, July 18, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

capacity utilisation rate dropped to below 80 percent.

In an annual steel demand report published in December 2024, the China Metallurgical Industry Planning and Research Institute (MPI) predicted that domestic demand for steel will drop by 4.4 percent and 1.5 percent in 2024 and 2025, to 863 million tons and 850 million tons respectively.

In 2020, demand reached 995 million tons, but then decreased year-on-year. The same year, output of crude steel surpassed 1 billion tons for the first time. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) proposed to reduce crude steel production around China's "dual carbon" goals – to peak carbon emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2060. Annual production capacity, currently standing at 1.3 to 1.4 billion tons, has caused a glut, meaning there is room to cut output.

Cutting steel production will reduce carbon emissions. According to the Energy Foundation, the steel industry is expected to halve emissions by 2035. Decreased demand should account for one-third of this cut, the biggest proportion. Meanwhile, there are concerns over how the capacity swap policy can be used to promote a transformation in steelmaking processes, which is crucial to achieve the dual carbon goals.

"When the capacity replacement policy was introduced in 2015, its primary goal was not carbon reduction. However, through replacing old equipment for new, transformation and upgrading, and optimising production capacity, the policy has contributed to carbon reduction in the industry," Qian Wentao, senior programme officer of the Industry Programme at the Energy Foundation, told *ChinaReport*.

Lin Zixin, another senior programme officer at the Energy Foundation's Industry Programme, told *ChinaReport* that the steel industry is paying close attention to whether the government will issue stricter policies, and how this will encourage the industry to upgrade. If the capacity swap policy fails to improve the production process and the industry relies on using old blast furnace technology when it builds new plants, it will lock-in carbon emissions for 15-20 years. This will make it challenging to achieve the carbon reduction goals.

According to the Energy Foundation, in addition to demand reductions, improving steelmaking will greatly decrease emissions, potentially by up to 30 percent before 2030.

Steel is made in two main ways. Traditional steelmaking uses a process known as blast furnace-basic oxygen furnace (BF-BOF), which involves smelting pig iron in a blast furnace, then adding scrap iron. Coke serves as both a reducing agent and the primary heat source in the blast furnace.

World Steel Association data shows that in 2023, producing one ton of crude steel in this way emitted 2.32 tons of CO2, while steelmaking accounts for 7-9 percent of global CO2 emissions.

The second is the electric arc furnace (EAF) process, which does not use coke. It produces new steel mostly from recycled scrap, pig iron or direct reduced iron, also known as sponge iron, using electric current as a heating agent.

Hydrogen Process

An emerging process uses hydrogen to replace coke to reduce iron ore to iron, which is then used to make "green steel," which can lower carbon emissions by up to 75 percent compared to the traditional process. But domestic hydrogen-based metallurgy projects are still in the demonstration phase.

While in some countries electric arc furnaces now produce most steel, in China, the proportion of EAF steel is relatively low, at around 10 percent, according to Qian Wentao. Between 2001 and 2022, the proportion of EAF steel in other countries rose from 37 percent to 50 percent. In 2022, the MIIT released a guideline ordering the proportion of EAF steel in total crude steel production to rise to 15 percent by 2025.

Qian noted that raising the proportion of EAF steel can achieve significant emissions reductions. "The capacity replacement policy could be a crucial tool," he said.

On January 15, standards for methods to calculate the carbon footprint of steel products were announced by the MIIT and other agencies. On February 28, the Electric Arc Furnace Steel Branch of the China Iron and Steel Association (CISA) was set up. Luo Tiejun, vice executive director, stressed at the launch ceremony that leveraging the full potential of EAF steel is "essential" to effectively addressing challenges of "a downward cycle in demand and intensified constraints on decarbonisation and low-carbon development," according to the English edition of CISA's website.

Changes in the market are already forcing steel companies to make lower-emitting products.

The MPI predicted construction industry demand for steel in 2024 would be 458 million tons, accounting for over half of total industrial demand for steel. But according to data released in January by the China Iron and Steel Association, the construction industry's demand for steel actually dropped to 50 percent in 2024, while steel demand in manufacturing rose to the same level.

The decline in real estate has had a marked effect on overall steel consumption. There are high hopes that increased demand in new energy fields will offset the decline.

"Due to the 'dual carbon' goals, demand has increased in the new energy vehicle industry. Other emerging industries with potential include electricity investment, wind power and solar energy," Lin said. "Steel companies, particularly the ones that invested a lot in terms of energy conservation and carbon reduction, are trying to diversify, hoping to find high value-added niche markets and optimise their product portfolio."

A new electric arc furnace is under construction at Xinyu Iron and Steel Group, Xinyu, Jiangxi Province, July 21, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Vehicle-driven

Vehicle manufacturing is a promising sector. In 2024, China's auto output surpassed 31 million units, and the country became the biggest automobile exporter in the world, taking over the top spot from Japan. The China Passenger Car Association said that in 2024, China shipped 6.41 million vehicles overseas, a 23 percent year-on-year rise, according to the General Administration of Customs of China. The MPI predicted that steel usage for automobile production would reach 57.5 million tons in 2024.

Zhao Mingnan, chief engineer of the China Automotive Carbon Digital Technology Centre, said that automotive steel boasts higher value-added than construction steel, especially as new energy cars are heavier than combustion vehicles, which increases the risk if they are involved in collisions. "To enhance safety, some key components of the vehicle, such as the battery tray, need to be made from high-strength steel or even ultra-high-strength steel," Zhao said.

At the same time, China's automakers are facing pressure to reduce their carbon footprint due to green trade barriers such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a policy that charges fees for imported goods based on the amount of pollution created in producing them. It multiplies the amount of steel used in a vehicle by the corresponding carbon emission factor to calculate the tax amount that should be paid.

The CBAM, which will come into force in 2026, is currently in an interim phase.

Zhao noted that by improving energy efficiency in traditional steelmaking processes, steel companies can save energy and reduce carbon emissions, but it has a limited effect on lowering the carbon footprint of a single car. Automakers are pinning their hopes on steelmakers lowering emissions by adopting hydrogen-based metallurgy and EAF steelmaking.

In mid-December 2024, HBIS Group, a major steelmaker in China, put into use the world's first hydrogen-based production line for automotive steel sheets. Based in Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province, it has an annual capacity of 1.5 million tons, and collaborates with Sinopec in the green hydrogen energy chain. HBIS is working with foreign and domestic automakers, including BMW and Mercedes-Benz from Germany and Great Wall Motors from China. Compared to the BF-BOF process, this project achieves a carbon reduction rate of over 70 percent. The ultimate goal is a near-zero carbon emission EAF steelmaking process.

A person close to HBIS Group told *ChinaReport* that HBIS invested in hydrogen-based metallurgy because it has deep insight into the forefront of

A robotic arm is used in the steel manufacturing process at Eastran Group, Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, June 1, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

market demand. But it remains challenging for some steel companies to see the changes in market needs, making it difficult for them to make corresponding investments.

Shi Huien from the China Steel Development Research Institute, a government-backed institution that researches the domestic metallurgical industry, told *ChinaReport* that some steel customers, especially automakers, set carbon-reduction goals every year for low-carbon or zero-carbon products. Some steelmakers plan to replace all their basic oxygen furnaces with electric arc furnaces because automakers are demanding low-carbon steel and threatening they will turn to other suppliers.

Costly Solution

While changes are necessary, steel companies face the challenge of balancing the costs and benefits of the transition.

"The main obstacle to the widespread use of low-carbon automotive steel is the price. Automakers want the price to be the same as or only slightly higher than conventional steel. However, transforming steel companies requires investment, which inevitably drives up prices and creates a green premium. Meanwhile, automakers are under great pressure to reduce costs," Zhao said.

"Steel doesn't account for too much in the cost of automaking, around 5,000 yuan (US$685) per vehicle. But due to the current stiff competition among automakers, especially ones with a big output, increasing the per vehicle cost by 5 yuan (US$0.7) requires approval from the board of directors at some companies," Zhao said.

Replacing blast furnaces with electric arc and hydrogen technology comes at a significant cost.

A climate action report by China Baowu Steel Group, one of the world's biggest steelmakers, said it invested 1.89 billion yuan (US$259m) in hydrogen-based furnace technology in 2021, which produces 1 million tons of steel, just 2 percent of its annual output. The cost to transform all its plants would run to 94.5 billion yuan (US$13b), based on these figures.

The cost of green hydrogen is another barrier. According to the Energy Research Institute, hydrogen produced via green electricity and water electrolysis costs about twice that of hydrogen produced using fossil fuels.

The cost of scrap steel, electricity and particularly green electricity all contribute to the high cost of using EAF technology to produce steel, which is why China is still dominated by blast furnace technology.

"In some countries, EAF steel accounts for 30-60 percent of total production. In 2022, when the MIIT released the guideline to boost the steel industry, EAF steel cost 200-300 yuan (US$27-41) more per ton," a man from a private steel company said on condition of anonymity.

Shi Huien said that as coke and coal prices have declined it costs even less to make blast furnace steel, while the end product of both processes costs about the same. This means the value of low-carbon production is not reflected in the pricing.

Zhao believes that if a steel company can lower costs and reduce emissions, it will certainly gain more market share. But there is a disconnect between producers and customers. Steel companies want their green products to get a higher green premium while their customers hope for the opposite. "The tug of war will continue," Zhao said.

Steel companies could prioritise stable demand over higher prices, according to industry experts.

"Producing low-carbon products no doubt increases cost, particularly in the initial stages of transformation, which needs customers to share the pressure and cost of carbon reduction. But few downstream companies are able to bear the green premium. The actions of big companies that are pioneers in purchasing low-carbon steel need to be expanded," Lin Zixin said.

An added complication is the lack of domestic and international certification standards, which makes it harder for companies to identify the amount of carbon reduction levels of steel products. "This uncertainty in turn makes it difficult for steel companies to make investment decisions for the transition," Lin said.

Besides market recognition, other tools including carbon markets and green financing could be used to help steel companies absorb and decrease the cost of the transition.

In December 2024, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, a Beijing-based non-profit organisation on environment research, published a report on carbon reduction along the automobile and steel and aluminium supply chain. It recommended a range of measures to increase the costs of high-carbon materials, such as taxes, and incorporating key raw materials such as steel and aluminium into the carbon emission trading market.

The report also suggests financial institutions and investors use tools like green financing to support automobile and steel and aluminium companies to scale up advanced technologies.

In September 2024, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment released a draft guideline that aims to incorporate the cement, steel and aluminium industries into the national carbon emission trading market. This means emissions will become part of a company's production costs, which should drive down the cost of low-carbon steel.

"It's crucial for steel companies to enhance their carbon management. No matter if it's because of inclusion in carbon market management, complying with international trade rules like the CBAM or securing downstream recognition and procurement of low-carbon steel, or to obtain green financial support, they will all need to disclose their carbon emissions," Lin Zixin said.★

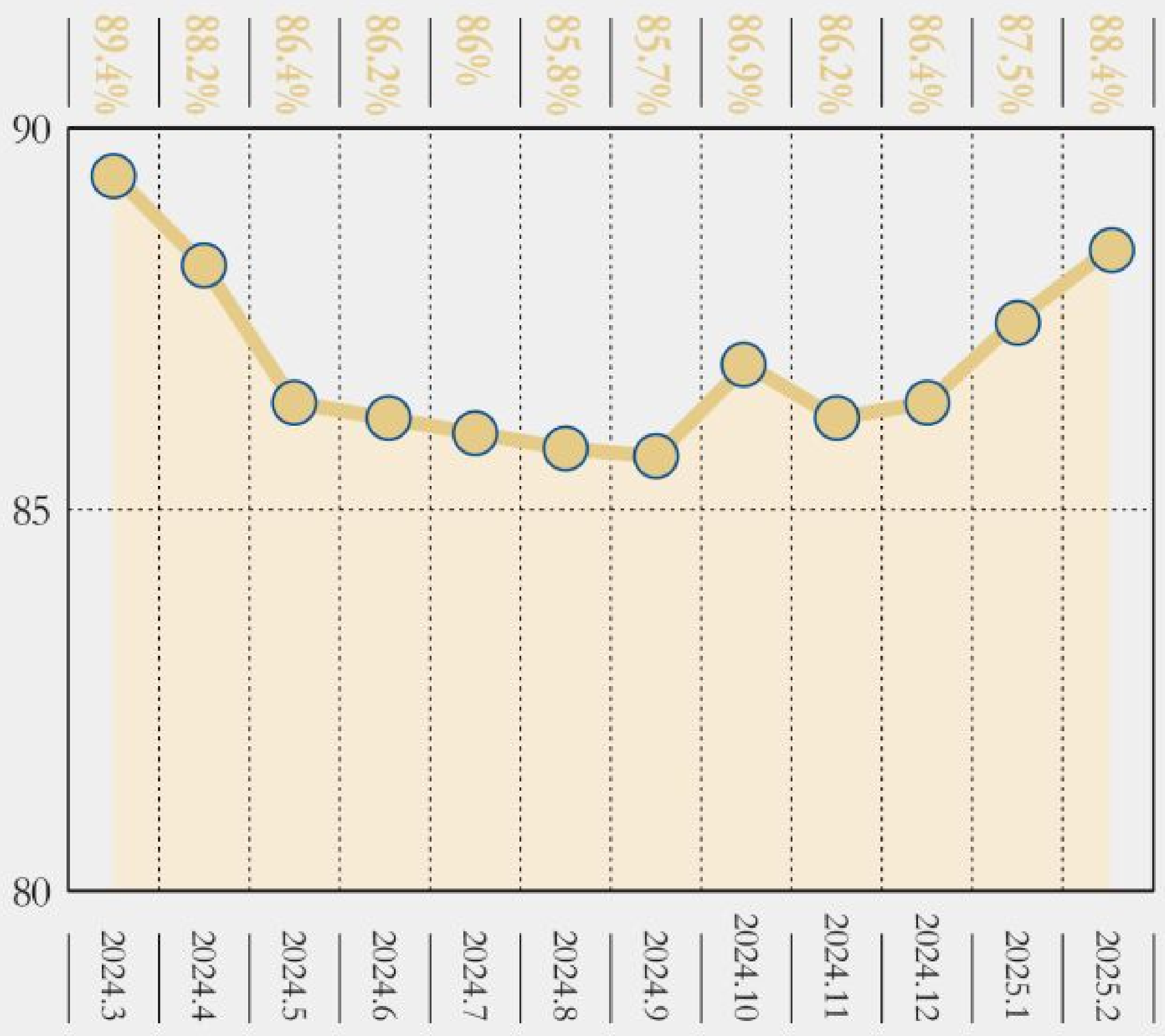
China By Numbers

0.9 percentage points

Growth in the consumer confidence index in February which has increased for three consecutive months

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Consumer confidence index between March 2024 and February 2025

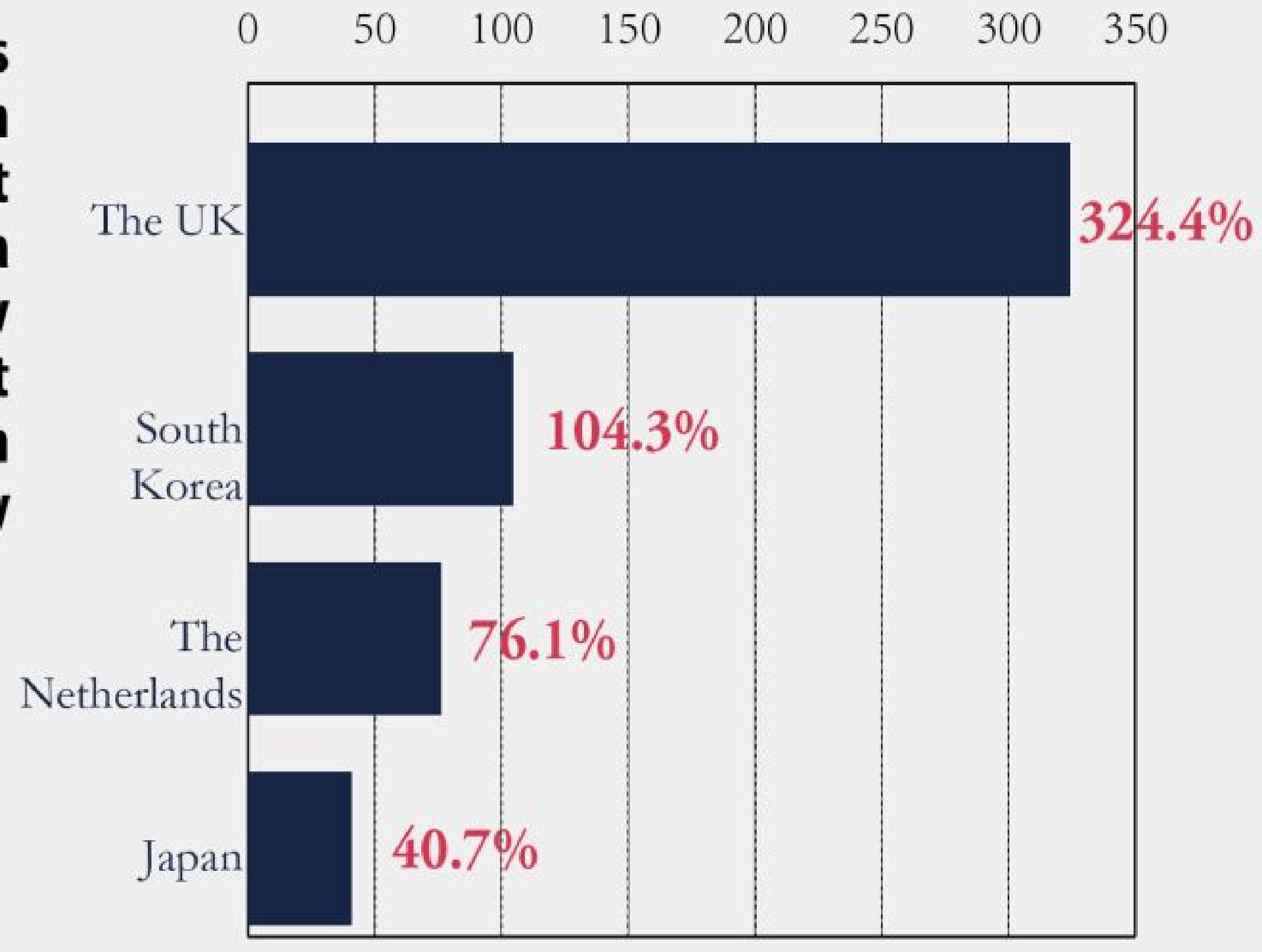


5.8%

Year-on-year growth in the number of foreign-invested enterprises established in the first two months of 2025, totalling 7,574

Source: Ministry of Commerce of China

Sources of foreign investment in China that saw the biggest growth in January



2.34:1

Ratio of urban to rural income in 2024, a decrease from 2.39:1 in 2023

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of China

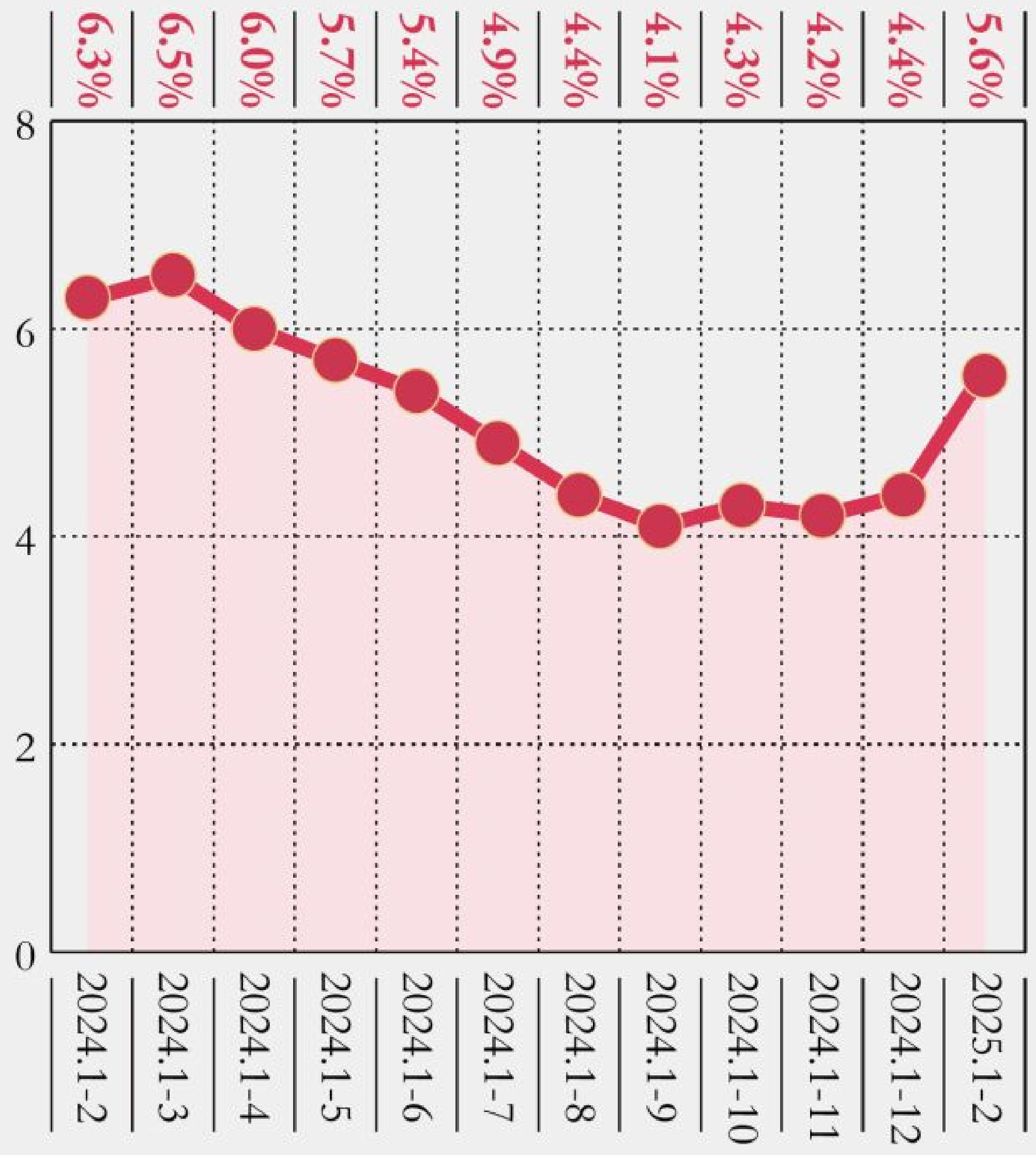
US$29 billion

Cross-border payment surplus of the non-banking sector, including enterprises and individuals, in February

Source: State Administration of Foreign Exchange

5.6%

Year-on-year growth in infrastructure investment in the first two months of 2025



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Folk Culture

Deer to Us

Folk culture expert Li Qian explains why deer hold auspicious meanings in both Chinese and Western traditions

By Guo Jia

Young people wear antler headbands on Christmas Eve, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, December 24, 2017 (Photo by VCG)

In the animation blockbuster *Nezha 2*, which premiered in January and broke box office records, an unexpected character sparked criticism.

The Deer Boy, clad in elegant white and gold robes, commands the demon-hunting forces with the air of a heroic, celestial knight. However, he reveals a darker side, turning out to be more ruthless than the demons he chases.

Many viewers took to social media to express their disapproval, condemning his lack of empathy and his support of evil, placing the Deer Boy among the film's most disliked characters.

Traditionally, deer symbolise longevity, agility and prosperity in Chinese culture. Like in the film, a deer serves as the assistant and mount of the Longevity God of the South Pole from Daoist belief.

Similarly, deer have appeared in mythologies across Europe. Artemis, the Greek goddess of the wilderness, treasured the stags of the forests and sought retribution against those who hunted them. In Celtic religion, deer are a symbol associated with Cernunnos, a god of nature, wild beasts and fertility. For centuries, deer hunting was a pastime associated with nobility and aristocracy in northern Europe, reflected in the animal's inclusion in hundreds of family crests and coats of arms.

More recently, Santa Claus is famously depicted riding in a sleigh pulled by nine reindeer – the most beloved being Rudolf, an image originating in the 1823 poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (also known as "The Night Before Christmas").

Is it just coincidence that deer play such prominent roles in both Chinese and Western cultures? What symbolic meaning do they carry? In an interview with China News Service, Li Qian, a writer and folk art expert, offers a multidimensional comparison of deer imagery in China and the West.

CNS: Are the deer associated with the Chinese longevity god and Santa Claus in Western culture the same? Why are deer seen as sacred and spiritual animals in both traditions?

Li Qian: This is an interesting cultural phenomenon. The God of Longevity rides a white-lipped deer, while the ones pulling Santa Claus's sleigh are reindeer.

The white-lipped deer (also known as Thorold's deer) is a treasured animal in China's western provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan and Sichuan, as well as Xizang Autonomous Region, while reindeer are mainly found in the circumpolar regions of the Northern Hemisphere, including Eurasia, North America and some large islands.

Though far apart, they are both among the best-looking species in the deer family. The white-lipped deer stands tall, has a slightly triangular head, long neck, big eyes, long and pointed ears, and a white lower lip and neck, all of which exude a venerable nobility. That's why it has always been regarded as a sacred deer. Reindeer are also tall, with thick fur that allows them to thrive in cold climates and wide hooves that allow them to run fast in the snow. Male reindeer have large antlers that make them look so strong they seem inviolable.

The God of Longevity is a deity in Daoism, a religion with practices involving the pursuit of immortality. Therefore, the god has an important position in its pantheon. As the mount of the God of Longevity, the deer naturally stands out as a special animal. From a biological point of view, the deer is not only muscular, but also robust and self-healing. The fact that its antlers grow and fall off every year undoubtedly gives it an aura of mystery, thus contributing to its presence in mythology.

The nine reindeer that pull the sleigh for Santa Claus are led by one called Rudolph, whose glowing red nose helps guide the way. Santa Claus is generally considered a figure inspired by St. Nicholas, and reindeer are among the animals closest to people living in the circumpolar North. It is docile, tamable and able to carry loads through the snow and across swamps and forests. In fact, dogs are also sleigh-pulling animals in North America, but as they tend to make a lot of noise, they are not an ideal choice for Santa, who has to be quiet when delivering gifts to children.

Top: A man looks at a Chinese ink painting that features a deer by Zhu Da, a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) artist, Beijing, June 23, 2022 (Photo by VCG)

Above: Deer sculptures in the Christmas village in Paris, France, December 13, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

CNS: As animals closely linked to human life, how have deer become integrated into both Chinese and Western cultures?

LQ: Since ancient times, Chinese people have adopted deer as totems, performed rituals with deer, enjoyed watching deer, told stories about deer, as well as created written characters and paintings using deer-related elements.

The Remedies for Fifty-two Ailments, unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tombs [which date back to the 2nd century BCE] in the central Chinese city of Changsha, records the use of burnt deer antlers for treating swelling and pain. Deer hides can be made into clothes for warmth, antlers can be used as decorations, even weapons [like the bows used by Deer Boy]. We can see Chinese people's deep fondness for deer is also reflected in Chinese characters. The character for "beautiful" in its traditional form (麗) uses the character for deer (鹿) as its lower part. As deer are beautiful and elegant when they run, the character 麗 has positive meanings such as "beautiful" and "gorgeous," among others.

In the meantime, the Chinese character for deer [鹿, pronounced *lu*] is also a homophone with (禄) which represents fortune and high political positions. Therefore, the deer is often included in traditional Chinese paintings as a symbol of good wishes. Many ancient painters created works with deer themes.

In North America, the Inuit of Alaska make their large Ulu knives [a curved cutting tool with thousands of years of history] with antler and ivory handles. For the Sami people of northern Norway, the reindeer is the primary basis of their economy and livelihoods. Deer are also present in Western names. For example, Oscar is derived from the Irish Gaelic word *os*, meaning "deer," and *car*, which comes from *cara*, meaning "friend." Overall, the deer represents happiness, beauty and power in both China and the West, which is yet another coincidence between Chinese and Western cultures.

CNS: What are the differences in the symbolism of deer in Chinese and Western traditions? What historical or cultural factors have contributed to these differences?

LQ: This answer can be found in Chinese and Western literary works. The famous classic *Book of Songs*, a collection of poems written from the 11th to 6th centuries BCE, features a piece starting with a line that reads "How gaily call the deer" in describing the relaxing atmosphere of a royal feast. This line was borrowed by Eastern Han politician and general Cao Cao (155-220) in his work "A Short Song" to express his desire to recruit talented people. Many ancient Chinese poems include deer-related expressions in allusion to hermitry, which was viewed as an idyllic and virtuous lifestyle for ancient scholars.

Li Qian

Among more contemporary Chinese literature, I am familiar with several works: In Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain*, the white deer, as the guardian of the plain, serves as a sort of divine omen. In Chi Zijian's *Right Bank of the Ergun*, the reindeer is the messenger of the gods, guaranteeing the survival of the indigenous reindeer-herding Ewenki people of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Children's book author Gerelchimeg Blackcrane from Inner Mongolia also celebrates life in his *Deer* series, which tell stories about children's friendship with reindeer and moose.

As for Western literature, the first work that comes to mind is the children's novel *Bambi* written by Austrian author Felix Salten. It explores the relationship between human and nature, which is also almost an eternal theme in Western animal literature. In British writer J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the deer is a guardian, which is relatively rare in Western literature. Canadian author Farley Mowat's *People of the Deer* [written in 1952 based on his experiences living among the Ihalmiut people of the Canadian Arctic] offers non-fiction narratives of deer and how they embody the spirit of their culture.

The human-animal relationship has always been a subject of human contemplation. Eastern and Western literary works have been able to present what the deer truly is in the wilderness and express their unique deep meanings with its imagery. Overall, Chinese writers are more willing to endow greater sophisticated meaning into the cultural imagery of deer, while their Western counterparts are more inclined to explore the human-nature relationship through the animal.

This difference might have to do with differences in ethics systems between Chinese and Western cultures. Since Ancient Greece, the West has emphasised that "man is the measure of all things" [attributed to the philosopher Protagoras], and draws a fundamental distinction between humans and animals with "reason." In modern times, the West has shifted attitudes towards animal ethics, such as protecting animal rights, improving animal welfare and promoting animal liberation. In traditional Chinese culture, there was no such distinction. More than 2,000 years ago, prominent philosophers such as Mencius advocated being "kind to people" and "treasuring everything on Earth," Xunzi advocated for people to "grasp and utilise the endowments of heaven," while Zhuangzi said that "all things and I are one."

However, with the changing times, especially amid global warming, the imagery of deer in Chinese and Western literature is seeing convergence, and a common concern and care for all life is arising, focusing on humans, animals and reverence for nature.★

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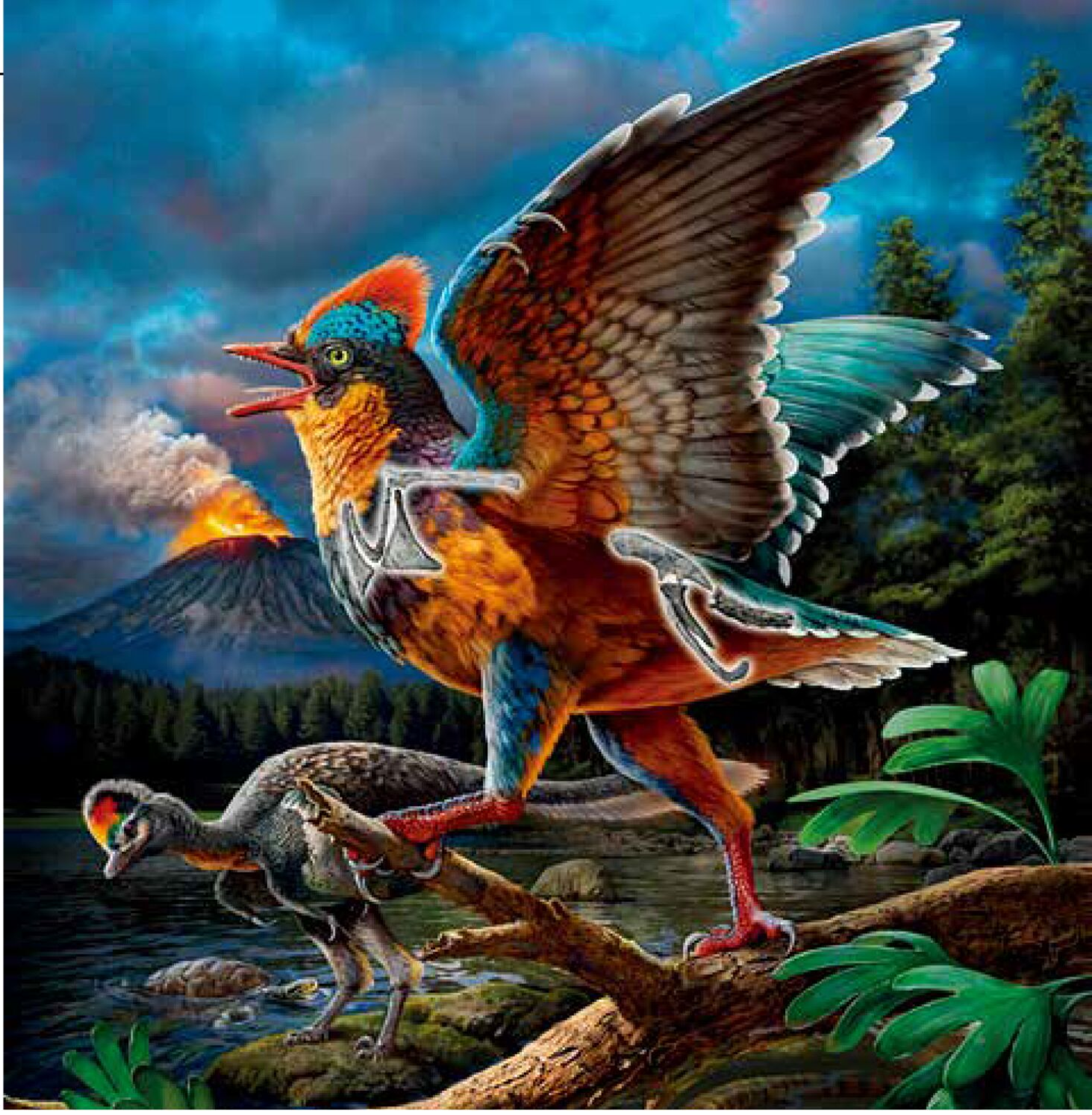
Paleontology

Early Bird

Chinese scientists have unearthed the oldest short-tailed bird fossil, pushing the class's origins back by 20 million years and offering new insights into early life on Earth

By Hu Yiqin



A recreation of what *Baminornis zhenghensis* might look like (Photo Courtesy of the interviewee)

In a remarkable discovery, a team of Chinese scientists unearthed the fossil of a bird that lived around 150 million years ago during the Jurassic period, which they believe could change the prevailing understanding of bird evolution.

The fossil was discovered in 2023 during a scientific expedition conducted by the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the Fujian Institute of Geological Survey, in Zhenghe County, Fujian Province. The newly identified bird, called *Baminornis zhenghensis*, is named after where it was discovered – Bamin is the ancient name of Fujian. The new discoveries "suggest an earlier origin of birds and a radiation of early birds in the Jurassic," noted the team in their research paper published by *Nature* in February.

Jurassic Beak

According to Professor Wang Min, who led the excavation, the region was a swamp in the Jurassic and is rich in dinosaur fossils. In October 2022, Wang and his team discovered a bird-like dinosaur the size of a pheasant. It had elongated legs and arms much like wings. Named *Fujianvenator prodigiosus*, the Jurassic creature belongs to a grouping called avialans that includes all birds and their closest non-avian dinosaur relatives. The finding, published in *Nature* in September 2023, provided new insights into the early evolution of birds, though it is still far from modern birds.

Encouraged by the finding, Wang's team conducted further excavations, finally discovering *Baminornis* in October 2023. About 15 centimetres long and weighing 100 grams, the species has some striking features, including a short tail with a fused bone structure called a pygostyle, which is also found in modern birds.

Wang told *ChinaReport* that the short tail is a distinctive feature that sets modern birds apart from reptiles such as lizards and crocodiles and is considered a universal feature of existing birds. The short tail helps shift the body's centre of gravity forward, aiding in maintaining body posture during flight.

"The emergence of the pygostyle is a landmark event in the evolution of birds from dinosaurs," Wang said, adding that the presence of the pygostyle in *Baminornis* indicates the body structure of modern birds had already formed as early as the Jurassic, pushing back the appearance of this feature by 20 million years.

Previously, fossils of the oldest short-tailed birds were dated to around 130 million years ago, such as the Cretaceous-era *Eoconfuciusornis zhengi* discovered in Hebei Province. It is the oldest known bird to have a beak and no teeth.

About Archaeopteryx

Wang's study, published in *Nature* on February 12, 2025, challenged the status of Archaeopteryx. Discovered in 1861 in Germany, Archaeopteryx is widely accepted as the oldest bird, and the transitional species between dinosaurs and birds. The species lived in the same period as *Baminornis*.

But in recent years, many scientists have started to question whether Archaeopteryx should be classified as a bird or a dinosaur given its long tail and other dinosaur-like features.

"The primary basis for classifying Archaeopteryx as a bird is the presence of feathers on its body. Animals with feathers are generally categorised as birds. However, with a long tail, Archaeopteryx resembles non-avian dinosaurs, while birds are typically associated with short tails," said Xu Xing, a paleontologist from the IVPP and a co-author of the study.

Xu noted that in recent years, several small dinosaurs resembling Archaeopteryx have been discovered in China and other parts of the world. These dinosaurs not only have feathers but also share similar skeletal structures with Archaeopteryx, including long tails.

In a study led by Xu, which was published in *Nature* in July 2011, Xu reported a new Archaeopteryx-like theropod found in China. He argued that many features found in Archaeopteryx, formerly regarded to have evolved for the purpose of flight, such as long and robust forelimbs, can also be found in non-avian relatives of birds, which challenged the centrality of Archaeopteryx in the transition to birds.

By contrast, *Baminornis* has more advanced features, including the short tail and shoulder and pelvic girdle features, making it resemble birds found in the later Cretaceous period that spanned from 145 to 66 million years ago. "*Baminornis* is the world's only definitive Jurassic bird," Xu said, "Its discovery has opened a window that allows scientists to glimpse the previously unknown world of Jurassic birds."

Tails and Wishbones

Zhou Zhonghe, another co-author of the study and CAS academician, told *ChinaReport* that a major difficulty in understanding bird evolution is the rarity of bird fossils. Fossilisation requires an animal to be quickly buried in sediment, a process usually involving water bodies such as rivers, lakes or oceans. Unlike land-dwelling creatures, which are more likely to die near rivers and lakes, where their remains can be quickly buried and preserved, birds often live in forests or open areas, so the chances they will be buried quickly are very low, Zhou said.

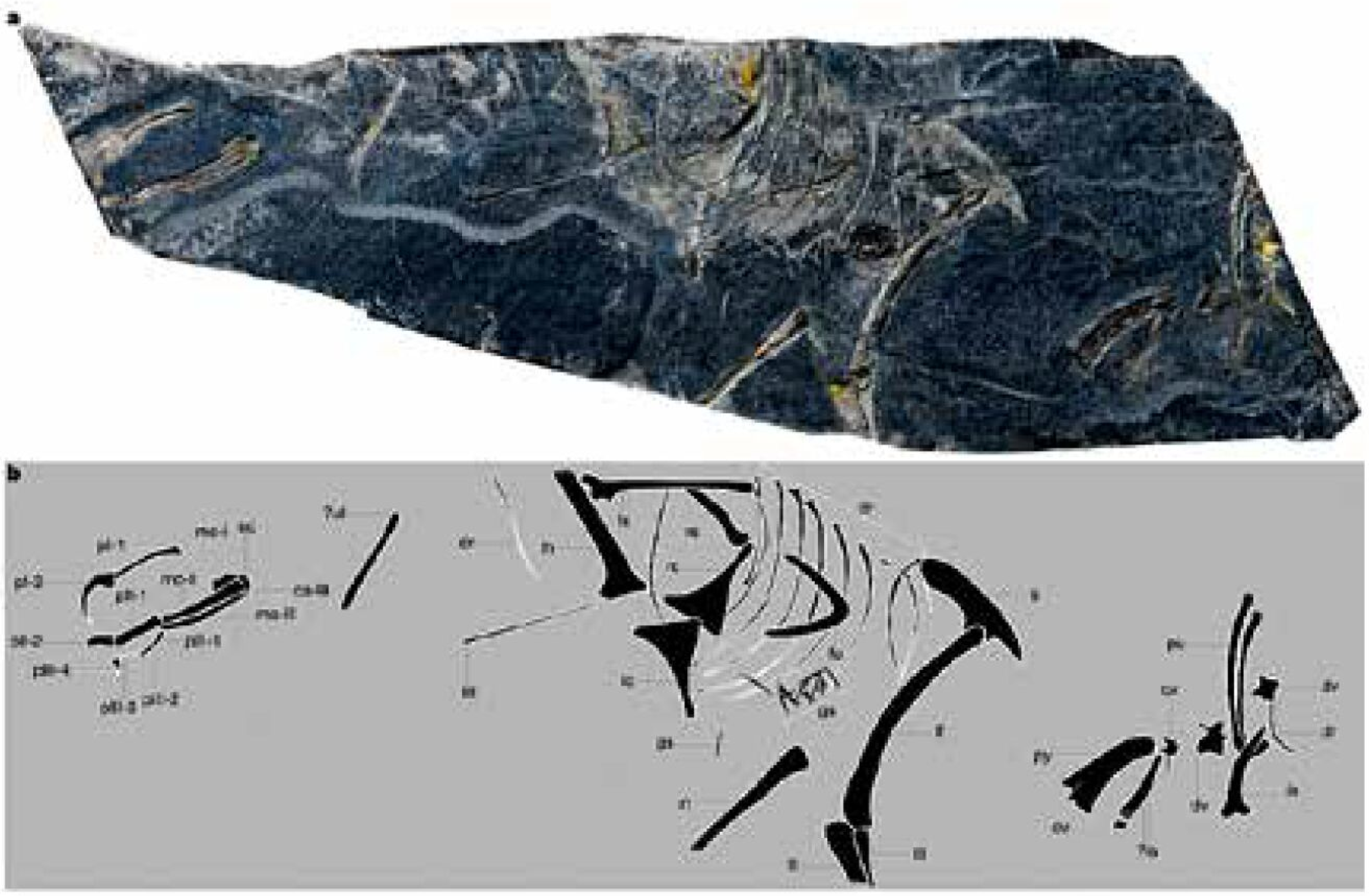
Moreover, birds are lightweight and have hollow bones, which are more fragile and less likely to survive the fossilisation process. The *Baminornis* fossil, for example, only preserves parts of the bird's skeleton, including its shoulder and hip bones, while its skull is missing, making it impossible for scientists to study its diet and whether it had a beak or teeth.

Based on other fossils found in the area, the team believes *Baminornis* lived in a swampy environment alongside dinosaurs, reptiles, turtles and fish. During their excavation, the scientists also discovered a solitary wishbone fossil, which resembles those of the *Ornithuromorpha* (birds with features closer to modern birds such as a pygostyle) from the Cretaceous period. According to Wang, the wishbone appeared to belong to a separate bird species living in the Jurassic. However, given its poor preservation, the researchers refrained from giving the new species a name.

"If the wishbone fossil indeed belongs to an *Ornithuromorpha*, it suggests that not only the origin of this group of birds can be traced to at least 150 million years ago, but the appearance of more primitive bird groups would be pushed even further back," Wang said, noting that the emergence of the earliest birds could also be traced to possibly 172 million to 164 million years ago.

Moreover, if there were multiple bird species in the region, it could suggest that birds were already diversified by the end of Jurassic period and that avian evolution had already taken place millions of years before *Baminornis* and Archaeopteryx appeared.

"The evolution of birds represents a pivotal event in the history of life on Earth," Professor Xu said. "The discovery of *Baminornis* sheds new light on the origins of birds and how they came to dominate the skies of our planet."★



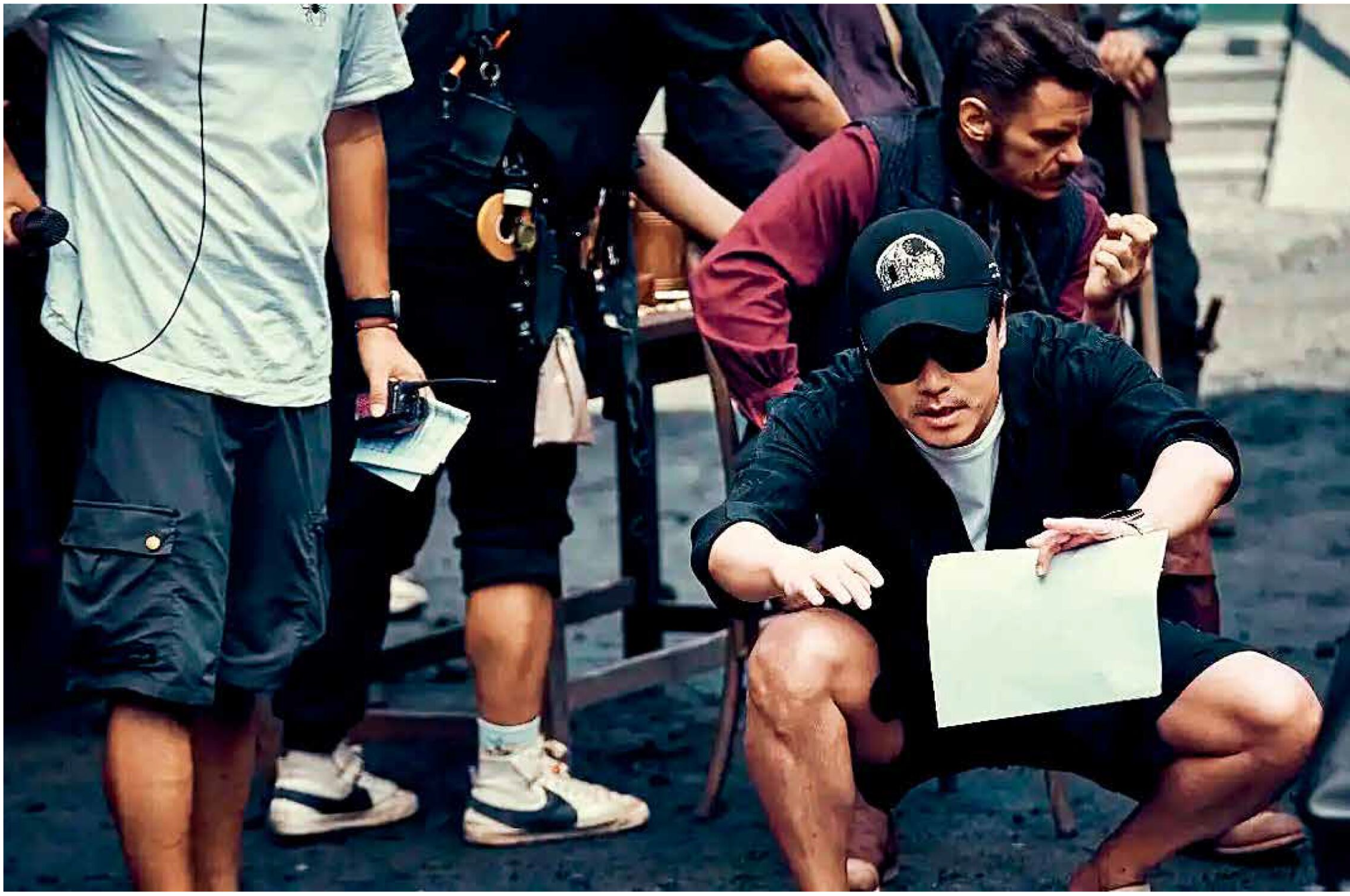
The discovered fossil of *Baminornis zhenghensis* and a drawing of the fossil (Photo: A screenshot of *Nature* magazine)

Film

Reel Strategy

Chen Sicheng, China's most commercially successful filmmaker, talks with *ChinaReport* about his landmark *Detective Chinatown* franchise, Hollywood influence and the challenges facing the Chinese film industry

By Hu Kefei and Yi Ziyi



Chen Sicheng directs a scene from *Detective Chinatown 1900* on location (Photo by VCG)

Start with a Jack the Ripper-type killer haunting San Francisco's Chinatown. Feature a mismatched detective duo reminiscent of Holmes and Watson, but way less competent. Then add rising anti-Chinese sentiment in turn-of-the-century America, the struggles of Chinese labourers who built the railroads and the crumbling Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

All these ingredients come together in *Detective Chinatown 1900*, the latest installment of director Chen Sicheng's hit *Detective Chinatown* franchise. The film

follows Qin Fu (Liu Haoran), a newly arrived Chinese medical student, and Ah Gui (Wang Baoqiang), a Chinese man who was orphaned and adopted by a Native American, as they team up to investigate a double murder.

The second-highest earning film of this year's Spring Festival holiday season (January 29-February 5), the action comedy had grossed 3.44 billion yuan (US$474m) as of March 5, trailing only the animated blockbuster *Nezha 2*.

Chen has spent nearly a decade building the *Detective Chinatown* franchise. Since debuting in 2015, its blend of comedy, suspense and exotic locations has produced four hit films, collectively grossing over 12.1 billion yuan (US$1.66b). So far, Chen's directorial works have earned a staggering 15 billion yuan (US$2.07b), making him China's most commercially successful filmmaker.

Now 46, the Shenyang, Liaoning Province native is known for his professional versatility as a director, screenwriter, actor and producer. But it is shrewd commercial instinct and keen understanding of mass-market appeal that has made Chen synonymous with box office success.

'Space for Reimagination'

Chen began his career as an actor, rising to fame for his role of a promising young solider in the popular military television drama *Soldiers Sortie* (2006). He later impressed audiences with his portrayal of a gay man in the 2009 Sino-French arthouse film *Spring Fever*, directed by Lou Ye. The film was nominated for the prestigious Palme d'Or prize and won Best Screenplay at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival.

However, it was his transition to filmmaking that truly showcased Chen's creative genius. In 2012, he wrote, directed and starred in the hit romantic TV series *Beijing Love Story*. Two years later, he adapted the series into a feature film, which grossed over 400 million yuan (US$55m) and established him as one of China's most promising new filmmakers.

But Chen's most significant contribution to Chinese cinema is his *Detective Chinatown* franchise. Launched in 2015, the first three installments focus on the modern-day adventures of Qin Feng and his eccentric uncle Tang Ren (reprised by actors Liu and Wang) on the case in the contemporary Chinatowns of Bangkok, New York and Tokyo.

With *Detective Chinatown 1900*, the franchise takes a new turn.

"I thought about the origins of Chinatown. Around 1900, the world was in a phase of rapid development and change. The West was undergoing the Second Industrial Revolution, and technological advancements reinforced the ambitions of Western powers. San Francisco, at the time, was full of immigrants from around the globe, with different groups weaving intricate networks of power within the city. Chinatown emerged in this historical context," Chen told *ChinaReport*.

Despite its lighthearted action-comedy exterior, the film delves into weighty themes: the struggles of early Chinese immigrants, the exploitation of indentured labourers and anti-Chinese sentiment at the time.

The story follows Qin Fu and Ah Gui as they investigate a high-profile murder case. The victims are Alice (Anastasia Shestakova), the daughter of Senator Grant (John Cusack), who is pushing to renew the Chinese Exclusion Act, and an older Native American man, Ah Gui's adopted father. The prime suspect is Bai Zhenbang (Zhang Xincheng), the son of local crime boss Bai Xuanling (Chow Yun-fat). If Zhenbang is convicted, it could spark a nationwide law expelling Chinese immigrants from the US.

The film sheds light on the harsh realities faced by Chinese indentured labourers who arrived in the US in the late 1880s to build the railroads. Ah Gui's father was among these labourers, enduring grueling work and meagre wages before tragically dying in a railway explosion alongside Ah Gui's mother. In his youth, crime boss Bai had also been a coolie, working with Ah Gui's father but surviving the same deadly explosion.

"The history of early Chinese immigrants in the US is filled with stories of struggle and conflict, leaving me with vast creative space for reimagination," Chen said.

Hollywood's Fortress

The *Detective Chinatown* franchise was inspired by Chen's time in Hollywood.

In 2014, Chen and other four rising Chinese filmmakers – Ning Hao, Xiao Yang, Lu Yang and Guo Fan – were selected for a programme at Paramount Pictures, where they studied advanced filmmaking techniques and production processes.

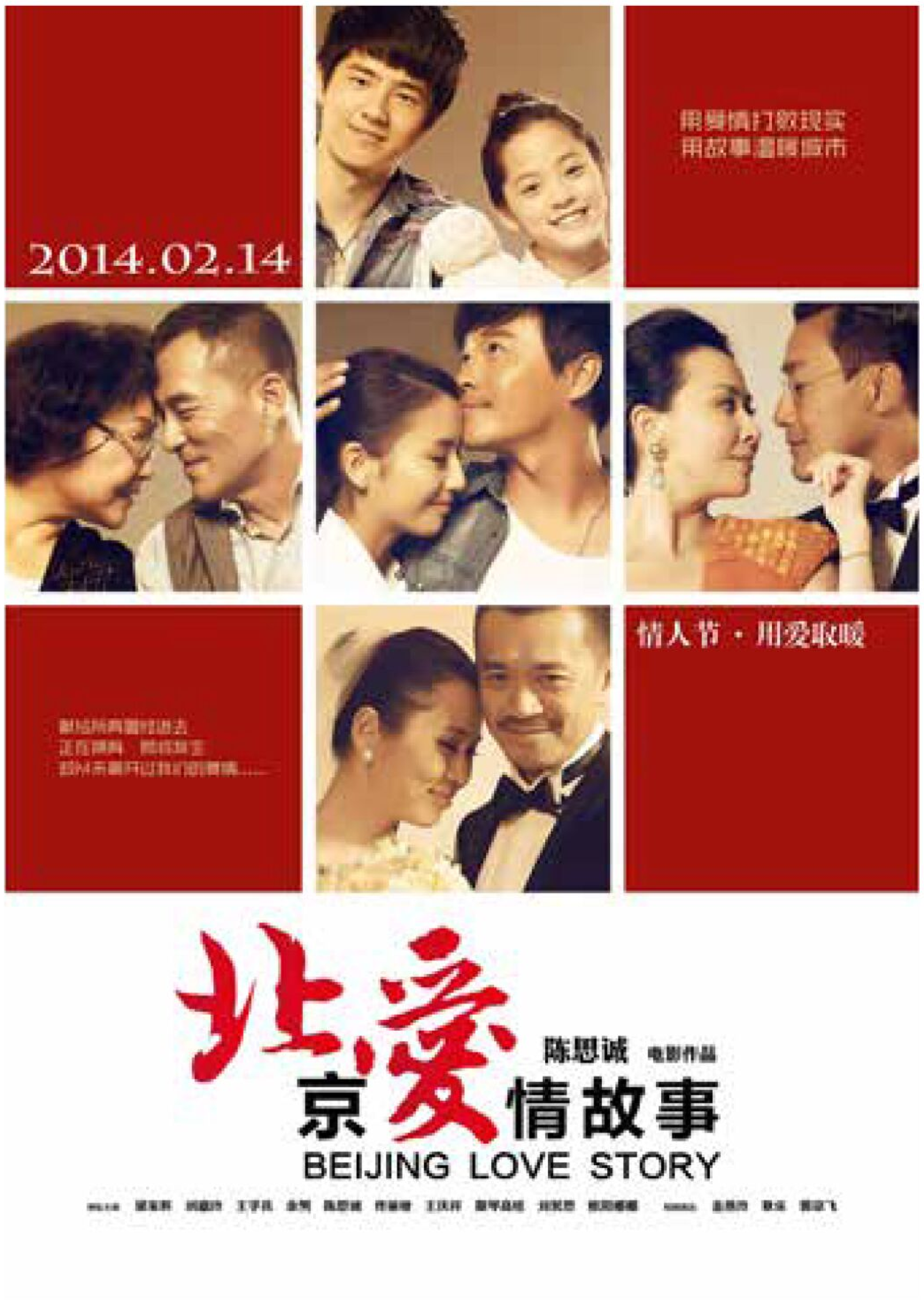
Reflecting on his Hollywood trip, Chen shared a thrilling moment: a car chase and explosion on the set of *Fast & Furious 6* (2013). "There was a scene in a parking lot with nearly 250 real cars parked there. After the explosion was filmed, most of the cars were completely burned, with only three still drivable. Imagine the cost! But it's a commercial film, and that's how it should be," Chen said.

"Then we all realised Hollywood is defending the uniqueness of film itself in its own way: It was building a technological fortress, giving audiences the ultimate audio-visual experience so cinema would be an irreplaceable form of entertainment," Chen said.

Another moment came when he and the other Chinese filmmakers were asked what was DreamWorks' most lucrative project.

"We made several guesses, but none of us even considered the correct answer: the royalties and franchise fees from the rollercoasters at Universal Studios," Chen said.

That led him to a crucial realisation. "In the long run, if China's film industry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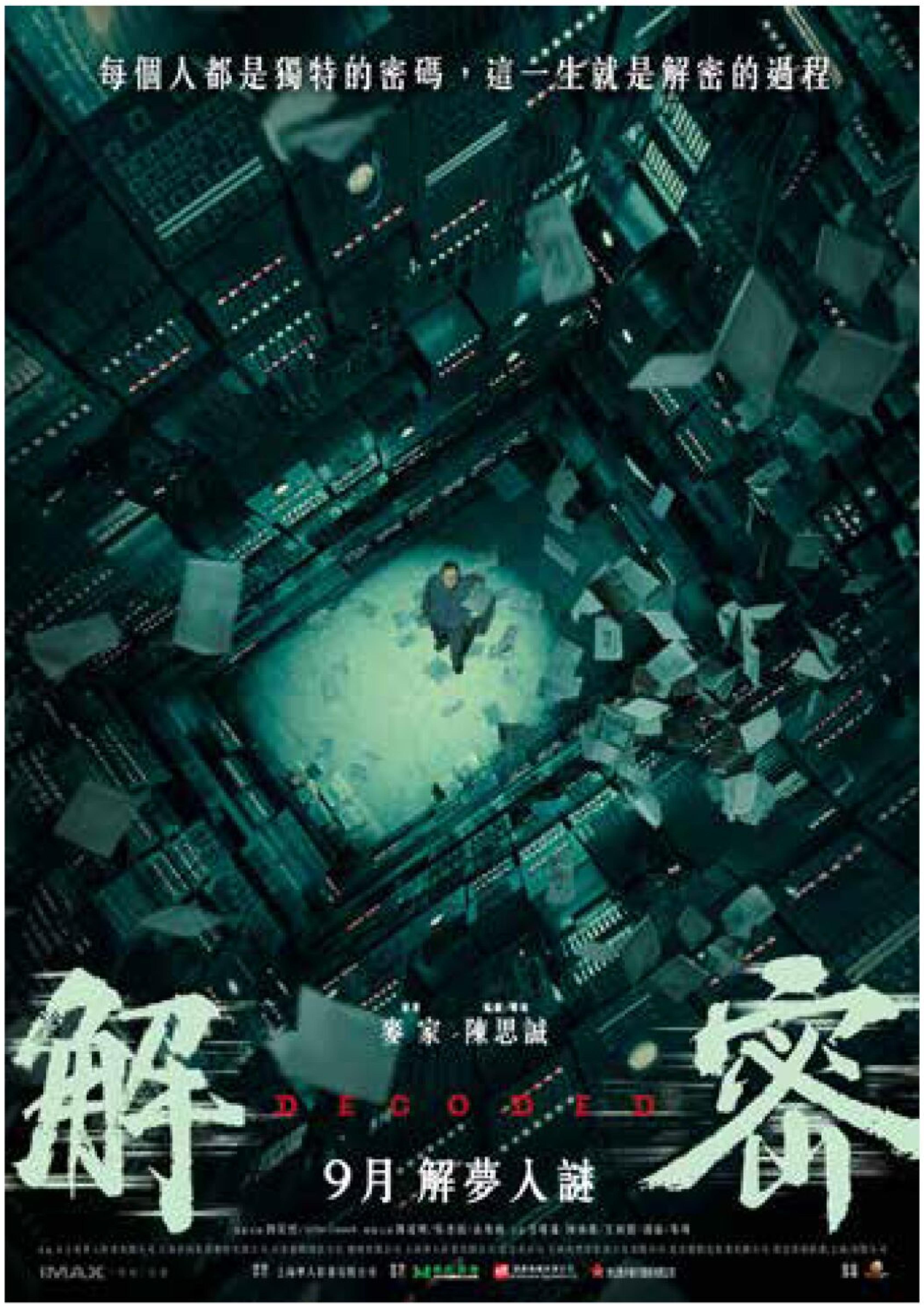
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solely relies on box-office revenue, it will always be at risk. I've long thought about ways to diversify revenue streams for our industry to solve this problem," he added.

After returning to China, the five filmmakers all went on to big-budget commercial filmmaking, each achieving groundbreaking success. Guo Fan's sci-fi masterpiece *The Wandering Earth* series (2019, 2023) opened a new chapter for Chinese science fiction. In 2018, Ning Hao produced the critically acclaimed *Dying to Survive*, about a pharmacy owner who smuggles cheap but unapproved drugs from India to help Chinese cancer patients. The next year, Chen released his first *Detective Chinatown* film with ambitions to develop the franchise along the lines of Hollywood's Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Crowd Pleasing

Along with its commercial success, Chen's work has also drawn criticism for its reliance on formulaic storytelling, lack of nuanced character development and emphasis on entertainment over artistic originality.

Many critics and viewers accuse him of being overly calculated in selecting subjects that tap into trending social issues to stoke public sentiment and boost ticket sales. Some see his approach as opportunistic and exploitative.

Detective Chinatown 1900, for example, has been criticised for promoting narrow-minded nationalism. Many argue its focus on racism and anti-Chinese sentiments in 1900s America leans too heavily into patriotic messaging.

"Chen is always so calculated. This time, he's peddling patriotism and nationalism. I don't want to be lectured during the Spring Festival holiday," Shi Cuizhi posted on Douban, China's leading media review platform. "This film encourages narrow-mindedness, provokes antagonism and agitates hatred," another user Shengruxiahua commented.

Similarly, *Lost in the Stars*, a mystery crime thriller written and produced by Chen, was criticised for exploiting gender-based tensions in China. The Hitchcockian suspense film is based on a real-life case in which a Chinese man pushed his pregnant wife off a cliff in Thailand as part of a life insurance scam. The film was a huge commercial success, earning 3.5 billion yuan (US$483m). Yet many netizens criticised Chen for capitalising on the growing mistrust towards relationships and marriage instead of

除夕晚上年夜饭 大年初一看唐探
导演 陈思诚 戴墨
DETECTIVE CHINATOWN 1900
唐探1900
大年初一 笑到家了
火爆预售中
领衔主演 王宝强 刘昊然 特邀主演 周润发

Posters of movies directed by Chen Sicheng

delivering meaningful messages about feminism and female independence in a sincere way.

"I'm an audience member myself. I live in the same society. I experience, observe and care about the same issues they do," Chen told *ChinaReport*. "Being a director doesn't make me different from most people. That's why I understand what people truly want to watch and what kinds of stories they crave."

He likens his filmmaking approach to "scrambled eggs with tomatoes," a simple, universally loved Chinese dish. "A good film must appeal to both refined and popular tastes. Over the years, I've tried to create stories that people of different tastes can enjoy together," he said.

The filmmaker has voiced deep concerns about the future of China's film industry. He believes the market is in a "live or die" situation, as more people opt for short videos and streaming over cinemagoing.

"It's not about whether the film industry is doing well or not, but whether it can survive. We're facing problems that filmmakers throughout cinema's century-long history had never faced before," Chen said.

Films are tied to cinemas as a primary distribution channel, which according to Chen is a particularly pressing issue in China as its industry is overly reliant on box-office revenue. "Cinemas can't survive without profit. There is a critical threshold for China's box office – if annual revenue falls below 48 billion (US$6.6b), 70 percent of cinemas nationwide would shut down. In 2024, we didn't reach that critical figure. The country only took in 42.5 billion (US$5.9b) in annual box office revenue," he said.

Given this reality, his top priority is staying active in the industry and bringing audiences back to cinemas. "At first, I felt hurt when people called me 'product manager-like director,' as I've always seen myself as a creator. But now, I accept it. Fine, I'm clever and calculated. The real competition isn't from other films released in the same season, but other forms of entertainment – particularly short videos and short dramas," he said.

Facing these challenges, Chen remains a pragmatist. "You have to rekindle audiences' enthusiasm for film. Don't stop, keep filming and do one's best to bring audiences back to the big screen," Chen said.★

Music

Eternal Soul

The sudden death of Hong Kong singer-songwriter Khalil Fong at 41 provoked an outpouring of grief on Chinese social media, where many are celebrating his influence on Mandopop and how his enduring legacy continues to inspire

By Yi Ziyi

Khalil Fong Tai Tung, Hong Kong singer and songwriter, rehearses for a concert in Hong Kong, March 27, 2019. A prolific figure in Chinese pop, he passed away in Dali, Yunnan Province on February 21, 2025. He was 41 (Photo by VCG)

A light drizzle fell over Chunxi Road, the busiest pedestrian mall in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Standing beneath the neon glow of shop signs, 28-year-old street musician Xu Jianjian adjusted his microphone, his voice tinged with sorrow.

It was the night of March 1, 2025. As always, Xu had set up his performance spot, but this evening was different. "I'm about to sing a song in tribute to a great artist who has gone to heaven," he told the gathered crowd.

He chose "Special Person," a beloved 2014 hit by Hong Kong singer-songwriter Khalil Fong Tai Tung. Earlier that afternoon, news of Fong's passing had been confirmed, sending waves of grief across the Chinese-language music world.

As Xu sang softly in the rain, more people stopped to listen. The melody, filled with longing, resonated deeply, and soon, some in the audience quietly joined in. Fong had written "Special Person" as a tribute to a once-in-a-lifetime love. Its lyrics now carried new weight in remembrance of the artist himself.

"You were the 'special person' we were lucky to know, Khalil Fong," Xu said after finishing the song.

Khalil Fong was a true Chinese pop original. Blending Eastern and Western musical traditions, he carved out a unique space in the industry with his silky-smooth vocals, genre mixing and authenticity. His music, an eclectic mix of R&B, soul, jazz, blues, funk and traditional Chinese influences, earned both critical acclaim and widespread popularity.

On the afternoon of March 1, Fong's record label, Fu Music, confirmed his passing in Dali, Yunnan Province in a statement posted on Sina Weibo and Facebook. "With unwavering optimism in the face of a relentless illness for five years, Khalil Fong gently and gracefully bid farewell to this world on the morning of February 21, 2025, stepping into the next realm of existence to carry forward his purpose and dreams."

While the statement did not specify his illness, media reports suggested that Fong had long battled pneumothorax, a condition that affects the lungs.

Swan Song

"I was climbing a mountain when I received the news of Khalil Fong's passing. It struck me like lightning. I was even listening to his songs that day, and then I found out the singer in my earphones was gone. I couldn't believe it," said Lu Nan, a 36-year-old university lecturer and Mandopop fan from Wuhan, Hubei Province.

"Fong wasn't my teenage favourite. Back in high school, I was obsessed with Jay Chou and David Tao. Compared to them, Fong didn't seem like a pop star, he didn't even fit the typical 'celebrity' label. He was too modest, too low-profile. But his songs were always in my playlist," Lu told *ChinaReport*.

"In mid-February this year, I followed Fong on Weibo. I did it because I knew he was still making music with sincerity and dedication, while so many veteran artists had become content with their past achievements. I also followed him because, in a way, he felt like an old friend. But less than 10 days later, instead of a new Weibo post from him, I was met with the news of his death. I couldn't process it. It felt like losing a lifelong companion, someone whose music had been with us for so many years," Lu said.

The sudden news sent shockwaves through Chinese-speaking communities worldwide. Online, fans flooded social media with messages of disbelief, grief and condolences. While many were blindsided by his passing, Fong's health struggles were not entirely unknown.

As early as 2010, Fong had been hospitalised multiple times due to pneumothorax, a condition aggravated by overwork. He experienced recurring chest pain and shortness of breath. In recent years, he had largely retreated from public life, choosing to live quietly in Dali, a chilled-out city in China's southwestern Yunnan Province.

Yet, despite his illness, Fong continued to create. On October 18, 2024, he released *The Dreamer*, his first album in eight years following the award-winning *Journey to the West* (2016).

Some listeners posted that his voice sounded fragile on several tracks. A day before the album's release, on October 17, 2024, Fong took to Facebook and Instagram, writing:

"My new album, *The Dreamer*, is quite literally a 'sick' album. It was recorded at different stages of illness... While my condition has improved significantly, it will still be a while before I fully recover. In life, we all face challenges, but through it all, let's not forget how to be dreamers."

Hu Tianxiao, a 32-year-old vinyl collector from Beijing, was among those who bought the album in February. "When I first received it, I never thought it would be his swan song," he said.

The Dreamer features 10 songs, all written and produced by Fong. Its green cover shows a cartoon figure raising his left hand in what seems like a greeting, with vines and flowers blooming behind him.

"Like all of Fong's albums, *The Dreamer* was crafted with care and sincerity," Hu told *ChinaReport*. "Each track was accompanied by a beautifully illustrated drawing that matched its theme, along with Fong's personal notes about his inspiration and emotions. His devotion to his music was evident in every detail."

"These days, whenever I play the album, I can't help but weep. I once thought the figure on the cover was saying 'hello.' Now, I realise he was saying goodbye," he added.

Finding His Voice

Born in 1983 in Hawaii, Fong grew up in a household steeped in music, literature and art. His father was a professional drummer and his mother an English teacher. From infancy, Fong was surrounded by his father's drumbeats, developing a keen interest in music from an early age.

By age 3, he was already travelling with his father's band, watching them perform from the sidelines. His childhood favourite, the Mexican folk song "La Bamba," planted the first seed of his dream to become a musician.

At 6, Fong moved with his family from Hawaii to Shanghai, where he immersed himself in a wide range of genres, from jazz and blues to rock and traditional Chinese music. The family later moved to Guangzhou in South China's Guangdong Province. By 15, the family had relocated to Hong Kong, where he attended high school and began seriously pursuing his dreams of songwriting and performing. Growing up in diverse environments enriched Fong's cultural background and deepened his musical exposure to both Eastern and Western styles.

The early 2000s saw the rise of gifted singer-songwriters in the Chinese pop scene. A new wave of artists, such as Taiwanese pop stars Jay Chou and David Tao, American-born musician Wang Leehom and Singaporean artist JJ Lin, gained popularity by blending Western pop genres, particularly R&B, with traditional Chinese music elements.

Among them, David Tao, often called the "godfather of Chinese R&B," pioneered the fusion of rock and R&B in Mandopop. Jay Chou, arguably the most influential Mandopop star of the 21st century, is credited with the genre *zhongguofeng*, or "Chinese-style" pop, which mixes R&B, hip hop and pop rock with traditional Chinese instruments, folk tunes, opera and classical Chinese-inspired lyrics.

In 2005, at a time when these singer-songwriters dominated the industry, Fong emerged as a dark horse. That year, Warner Music Hong Kong released his debut album, *Soul Boy*, which uniquely blends R&B, soul and jazz with Chinese musical elements. His sophisticated artistry and creative prowess stunned the industry, earning him the *Chik Chak* New Male Singer Award in 2006, an annual honour from Commercial Radio Hong Kong.

Over the next decade, Fong released eight albums, wrote numerous hits and performed in stadiums and concert halls around the world. At the core of his music is a deep appreciation for R&B and soul, shaped by artists like Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Al Green, D'Angelo and John Mayer, his velvety vocals complementing a bed of rich harmonies, intricate guitar work and sophisticated rhythms.

Fong was nominated six times for Best Male Artist at the Golden Melody Awards, one of the most prestigious honours in the Chinese music industry. In 2017, he finally won the category with his album *Journey to the West*.

Beyond his solo career, Fong made significant contributions to Mandopop as a songwriter and producer, crafting music for Chinese pop icons like Jacky Cheung, Andy Lau, A-mei, Eason Chan and Fiona Sit.

In 2018, he expanded his creative vision beyond music, releasing a six-book graphic novel series for children titled *Emi the Dream Catcher*. He had planned to publish 30 titles over the next decade.

Life is a Dream

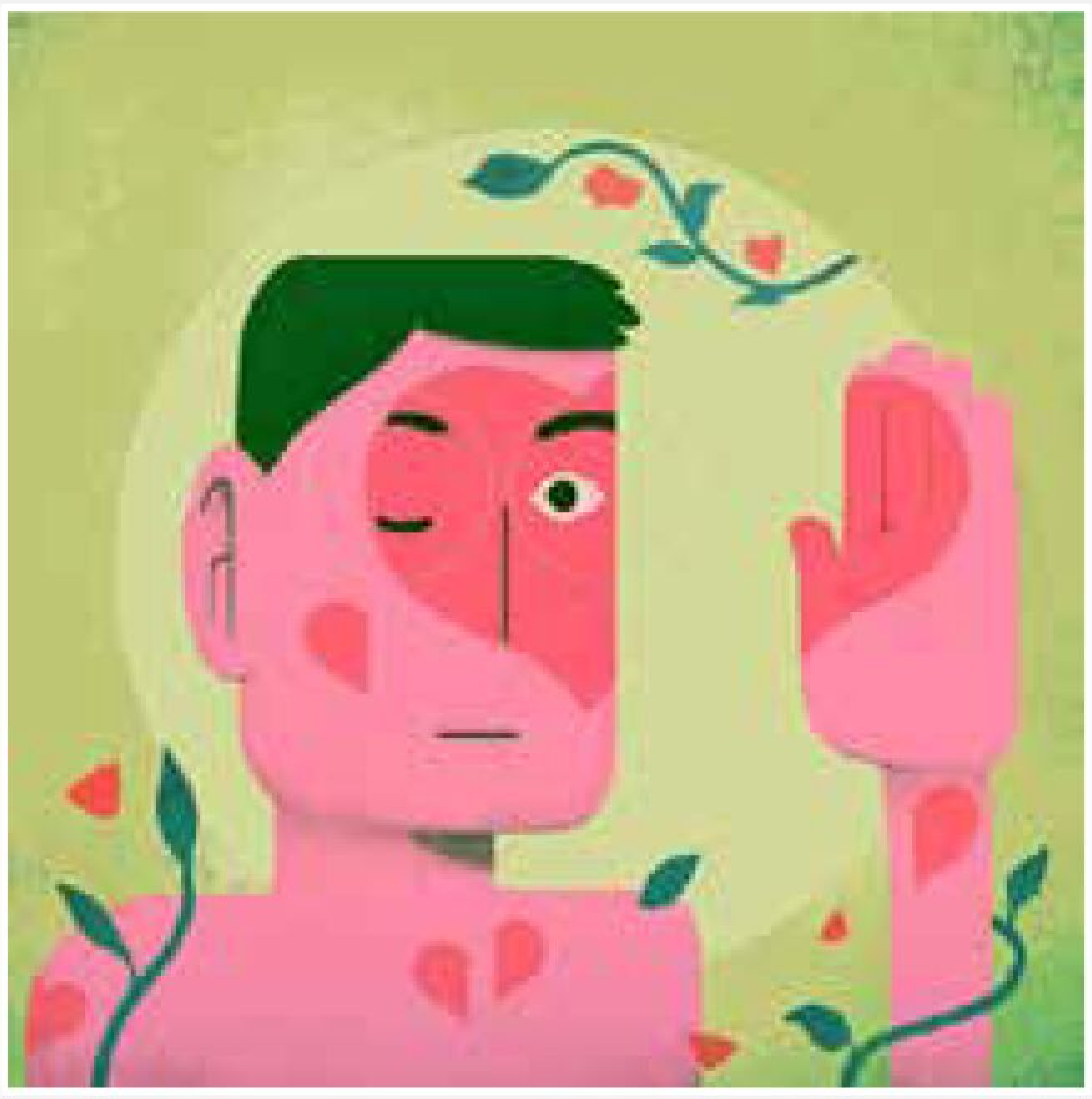
In an article titled Khalil Fong's Impact on Chinese Pop Music posted on Sina Weibo, Erdi, one of the most influential critics in the field of Chinese pop music, elaborated on Fong's influence on audiences and artists alike.

"When evaluating a musician's impact, there are two key criteria: popularity among the public and influence on other artists within the industry. A great musician must have both.

"Khalil Fong possessed both kinds of influence. He wrote numerous hits that resonated across generations, and, more importantly, he shaped the music of his time and inspired younger artists," Erdi wrote.

As Erdi pointed out, mainstream audiences in China have traditionally focused on a song's melody, lyrics and vocals, often overlooking rhythmic complexity.

"Khalil Fong placed rhythm at the heart of his music, allowing listeners to truly feel the groove of soul, R&B, funk and jazz. He shifted the audience's attention beyond melody and lyrics to appreciate intricate arrangements, instrumentation, harmonic composition and meticulously crafted rhythmic structures. He deepened the mainstream appreciation of rhythmic music and elevated their musical sensibilities," Erdi said.



The cover of Khalil Fong's 2024 album *The Dreamer* (Photo by VCG)

Since the 2010s, genres such as R&B, neo-soul and hip-hop have flourished in Mandopop, especially among China's Gen-Z. According to Erdi, Fong played an important role in this transformation.

Following his passing, artists from across the industry, particularly younger musicians, expressed their grief and shared personal stories about how his music had shaped them. "To my surprise, among the countless tributes from within the industry, the most prominent voices of mourning came from Chinese rappers," Erdi observed. Figures such as Tizzy T, After Journey, PACT, PSY.P, Vinida Weng, Young Jack and Ice Paper all paid their respects, highlighting how Fong's music had shaped their artistic journeys. "His impact on Chinese pop music was far greater than I had ever imagined," Erdi wrote.

Aspartame (Tian Hongkun), a 22-year-old rapper, expressed his sorrow on Weibo shortly after Fong's passing was confirmed: "It broke my heart. Because of you, I chose music. Your songs carried me through nights filled with every imaginable emotion, from joy and sorrow to excitement and loneliness. Your music taught me how to feel, to love and to understand the world. Every song of yours fills a day in the calendar of my life. I hope you continue chasing your dreams in another world."

At Fong's memorial service on March 1 in Dali, his final words, written from his hospital bed, were shared with the public: "Time waits for no one. As we grow older, we come to understand both the reality and illusion of time. Life presents us with challenges and unexpected turns, but I believe one of our goals should be to walk its path with grace... The name *The Dreamer* symbolises that even in the face of illness and adversity, I remain here, filled with creativity and dreams.

May you, in the days to come, continue to hold fast to your dreams, persevere in your efforts, grow, evolve and fully realise your potential at every stage of life."

Beyond mourning, many netizens reflected on Fong's passing as a reminder of life's brevity. "His death shocked me and forced me to confront the inevitability of loss. We've reached the age where we must face the passing of idols, our old friends who once accompanied us through life's journey. Life is short and unpredictable; we must live fully, pursue what truly matters, and cherish time with those we love," wrote RedNote user Li Mini. Her post garnered nearly 4,000 likes.

Meanwhile, demand for Fong's *Emi The Dream Catcher* series surged, leading to preorders for reprints.

Zhang Rong, a longtime fan and mother of a 4-year-old in Shanghai, joined an online group dedicated to tracking updates on *Emi The Dream Catcher*. "Many group members are both Khalil Fong fans and parents," she told *ChinaReport*. "I've managed to preorder the first three volumes, but the remaining ones aren't available yet. Once I receive them, I plan to read them to my son. I hope he grows up to be as pure, bold and persevering as Fong was."★

Education

Slanging Match

As Internet slang and memes increasingly make their way into school-age children's daily conversations and even formal writing, educators are concerned that its excessive use could lead to a decline in their linguistic and cognitive abilities

By Lin Qixin

"*BBQ le*, we're all done for!" shouted a boy in Yu Gu's class, prompting her fourth graders to burst out laughing.

Pronounced *ba bi cue le*, the phrase is a homonym for "barbecue" often used in Chinese internet slang to express that "someone messed up." In this case, it is closer to "we're cooked."

Yu, who teaches grammar in Huizhou, South China's Guangdong Province, has grown increasingly frustrated as students use internet slang, jargon and memes during class – and even in their writing.

Some are easier to understand for the uninitiated. For instance, *zha lie* translates to "explosive" but means "awesome." Others are deliberate obfuscations, such as *zun du jia du*, which is a mispronunciation of the standard Chinese for "really?" Then there is "666": Devoid of satanic reference, it is merely a numerical shortcut for "cool."

"I get really angry and seriously criticise them," Yu told *ChinaReport*. "But it doesn't work. The next day, or even next class, they're shouting internet slang again."

Like their peers worldwide, China's Gen Z and Gen Alpha use the internet's ever-changing language in their daily lives. However, as a sizeable portion of cyber slang is derogatory and conveys negative values, parents and educators increasingly worry that excessive use will not only degrade students' communication skills but also harm their cognitive and moral development.

'Mind Your Language'

Liu Xiaoli, a Chinese teacher at a state primary school in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, habitually circles internet slang in her students' compositions. "Internet slang, when used well, can add a touch of freshness to writing," Liu told *ChinaReport*. "But so far, I haven't come across any of this kind. Essays containing internet slang are generally very poorly written, mostly by students who struggle academically and are obsessed with the internet."

A common one Liu comes across is *shuan Q*, a sarcastic mispronunciation of the English words "thank you," often used to express frustration or disdain.

"Mind your language" is a common refrain from Li Xiu, a Chinese teacher at a primary school in Qingyuan, Guangdong Province. She reprimands her students when they use slang she deems insulting or indecent, in class or in their writing. Examples she cited include phrases like *shen me gui*, similar to "what the hell," and *lao liu*, which means "backstabber" or "creep."

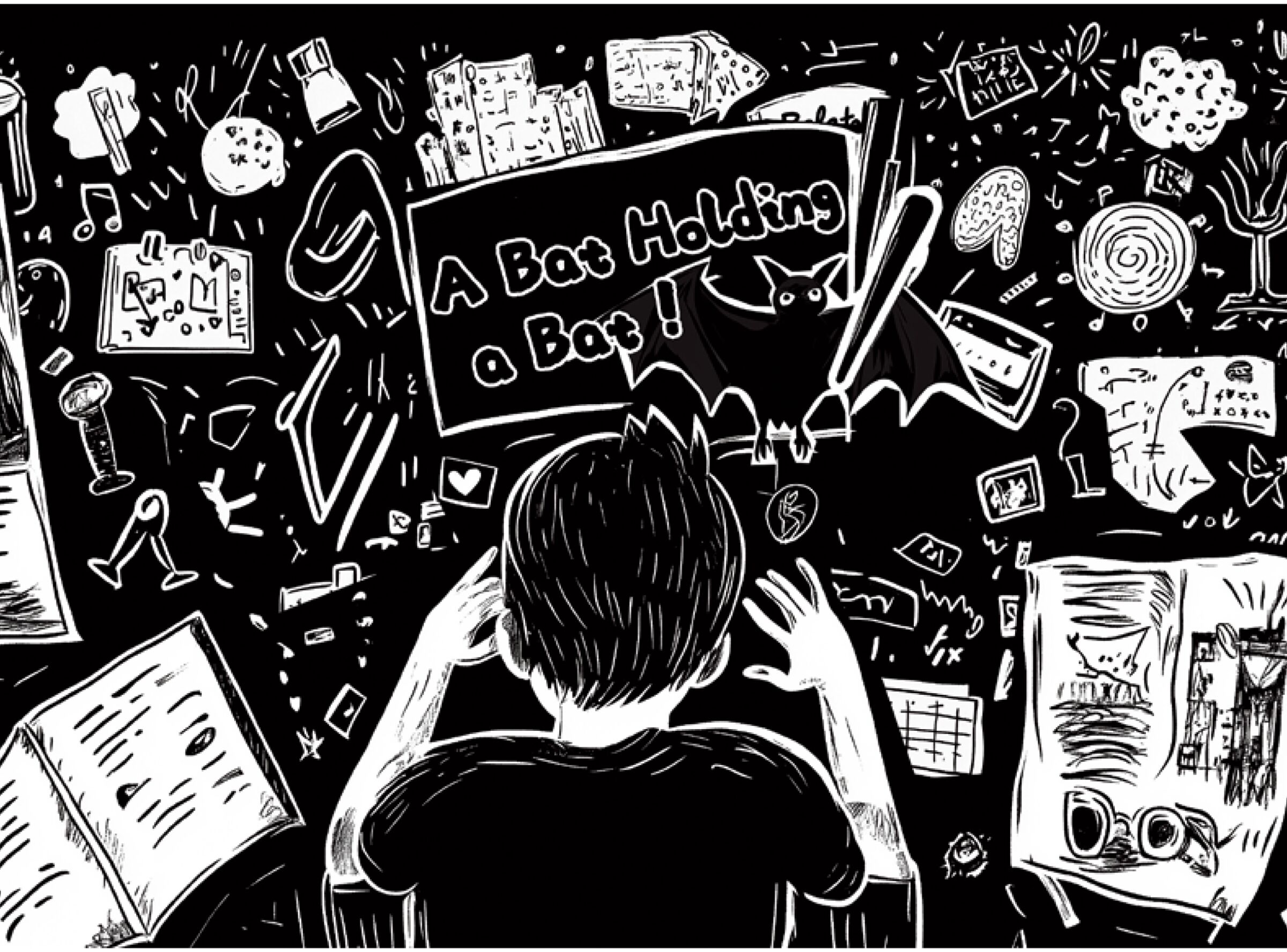
"It's definitely a problem if students use such phrases excessively, without regard for context," Li said. She fears that prolonged exposure to vulgar internet content could hinder students' communication skills and have negative effects on their values.

Exposure to online content is increasing. The number of internet users under 18 in China reached 193 million in 2022, according to a report by the Chinese Youth League Central Committee and the China Internet Network Information Centre. Internet penetration for the age group rose from 93.5 percent to 97.2 percent between 2018 and 2022, with the internet usage rate for students in grades 1-6 increasing from 89.5 percent to 95.1 percent over the same period. The report also revealed that 90 percent of minors own personal internet devices, primarily smartphones.

The rise of short-video platforms like Douyin has further lowered the barrier of access to internet slang and memes.

"In the past, people learned internet buzzwords and slang primarily through text and images. Nowadays, children are introduced to these expressions directly through videos," said Zhou Yan, associate professor at Shandong University's School of Cultural Communication.

Zhou gave the example of *lao deng*, an older term from northeastern Chinese dialects meaning "dirty old man"


A Bat Holding a Bat!

Internet slang and memes are invading Chinese children's daily conversations, causing concern among educators (Illustration by Tian Hao)

or "old pervert" that has since found widespread use online to describe any middle-aged or older male.

Zhou noted that many children and teens do not fully grasp the derogatory connotations of such terms. "Children have a stronger desire to fit in with their peers," Zhou said. "Using the latest internet buzzwords, slang and memes helps them feel trendy and gain a sense of belonging."

Teenagers embrace and spread the latest internet slang far more enthusiastically than any other age group, Zhou observed.

Hard to Handle

Many educators noted that most parents neglect playing a role in guiding children in using internet language appropriately and critically.

"My parents don't understand internet slang and memes at all. Since they don't understand the language, they don't care about it," said Wu Yi, who studies at a university in Dalian, Northeast China's Liaoning Province. His younger brother, a high school student in Guangzhou, has been using internet slang since middle school. He often says it at home in front of their parents.

"My parents were quite indifferent to my brother's way of speaking. They just thought he was showing off," Wu told our reporter. He added that some of the slang his brother uses is extremely offensive, such as *xiao tang ren*, a derogatory term used to insult those with Down syndrome. While Wu has tried to stop his brother from using such language, his efforts have been in vain.

Professor Zhou Yan emphasised that despite these issues, internet language has developed its own intrinsic vitality over the past three decades. "Embedded with people's emotions, judgements and experiences, it is fundamentally a highly expressive language. By creating and using such language, people have formed a social consensus," Zhou said.

"Of course, we should embrace positive and creative internet language to enrich our expressions. But we must also shield minors from internet jargon, slang and memes with vulgar, violent, indecent or discriminatory connotations," said Huang Chuxin, secretary-general of the New Media Research Centre at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "While fostering the use of normative language, we should also protect linguistic diversity and avoid excessive interference."

On September 30, 2024, the Ministry of Education issued a notice aimed at promoting the country's linguistic and cultural heritage. Titled "Notice on Strengthening Standard Chinese Character Writing Education in Primary and Secondary Schools," it requires teachers and students to avoid using improper abbreviations in formal writing.

In response, since late 2024, schools across China have implemented measures to guide children and teens in their language use. According to a report in the *Yangtze Daily*, since late October 2024, many primary schools in Wuhan, Hubei Province formally banned students from using internet slang and memes in both writing and public settings.

Banned expressions include the previously mentioned *lao liu* ("backstabber" or "creep") and *lao deng* ("dirty old man"), as well as phrases combining Chinese and English, such as *BBQ le* ("barbecued") and abbreviations born from keyboard shortcuts like "YYDS" (similar to "GOAT," or "greatest of all time" in English) and "XSWL" (similar to "LMAO" or "laughing my ass off").

Jiang Mei, a teacher of Chinese for 16 years at a public high school in Guangzhou, urged patience from both teachers and parents. "There are stages to every child's development. If a child frequently uses improper internet slang in speech or writing, it doesn't necessarily mean their language proficiency is poor or that their mind is corrupted – it's unfair to make such judgements," Jiang said.

Based on her observations, the frequency of using internet slang in public and in writing decreases significantly with age. High school students are less likely to use inappropriate language in formal contexts. "But in their daily conversations, they still use it quite often," Jiang noted.

Brain Rot

In December 2024, Oxford University Press announced "brain rot" as the Oxford Word of the Year, defining it as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material considered to be trivial or unchallenging."

In online content, brain rot refers to excessive consumption of digital media, particularly short-form entertainment, which may negatively affect cognitive health. "The prevalence of internet slang and memes is not just a matter of language but also a matter of the mind," Jiang told *ChinaReport*.

Jiang noted that this cognitive decline is evident in high school students' writing. "When writing argumentative essays, students today have access to a broader range of content but are much weaker in deep and critical thinking compared to their peers from a decade ago," she said.

"I often feel there's an invisible barrier every time I try to encourage my students to think deeply and critically," Jiang said. She observed that today's students are more likely to settle for shallow and routine cultural content. Internet slang and memes, often entertaining and emotionally provocative, can reduce teenagers' motivation to learn formal, clear and profound expressions when consumed excessively.

Children are not the only ones susceptible to brain rot. Jiang pointed out that many adults today lack the patience to read books or watch films, instead gravitating towards low-quality internet content, such as poorly made short videos or ultra-short dramas.

"Adults must first acknowledge the severity of this cognitive degeneration and take the lead in making changes. Otherwise, it will be difficult for children to improve their own mindsets, as they tend to mimic adults," Jiang said.

Zhou Yan highlighted that language is a carrier of culture and that the order in which language is acquired affects one's understanding of culture. Many internet slang phrases and memes parody classical culture and history in a deconstructive or profane manner. A common target for parody is *Journey to the West*, a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) novel that fictionalises the pilgrimage of Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang to India in the 7th century to collect Buddhist scriptures.

"For example, some children and teens may have never read the original *Journey to the West* or seen its TV adaptations, but they know memes about the book's main character, the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, through the internet. They may mistakenly see Xuanzang as a boring, long-winded and muddle-headed man, ignoring his kindness, righteousness and forbearance," Zhou told *ChinaReport*.

"When juveniles consume classic and high-quality cultural products in abundance, they develop a more precise, elegant and sophisticated way of expressing themselves," Zhou said. "Only then will they naturally build an immunity to the rude and vulgar expressions prevalent online."★

History

Censer Sensibility

A 2,000-year-old gilt-bronze incense burner known as the Boshan Censer from the Western Han Dynasty bridges ancient history with contemporary storytelling due to its perceived connection to blockbuster *Nezha 2*

By Song Yimin and Wang Yuyan

Amid the wave of excitement surrounding the hit animated film *Nezha 2*, an artefact known as the Boshan Censer has unexpectedly captured the public's attention due to its striking resemblance to a key item in the film referred to as the "Seven-Coloured Treasure Lotus."

The climax of *Nezha* (2019) sees main characters Nezha and Aobing becoming spirits, their bodies disintegrating. To restore them, Taiyi Zhenren, Nezha's master, devised a plan to reconstruct their bodies using the seven-coloured lotus, which appears at the beginning of the blockbuster sequel.

After *Nezha 2* broke box office records, becoming the top global grossing animated film of all time, Hebei Museum in provincial capital Shijiazhuang, where the incense burner is on display, is breaking visitor records of its own. More than 2,000 years after its creation, this ancient artefact still sparks such widespread interest.

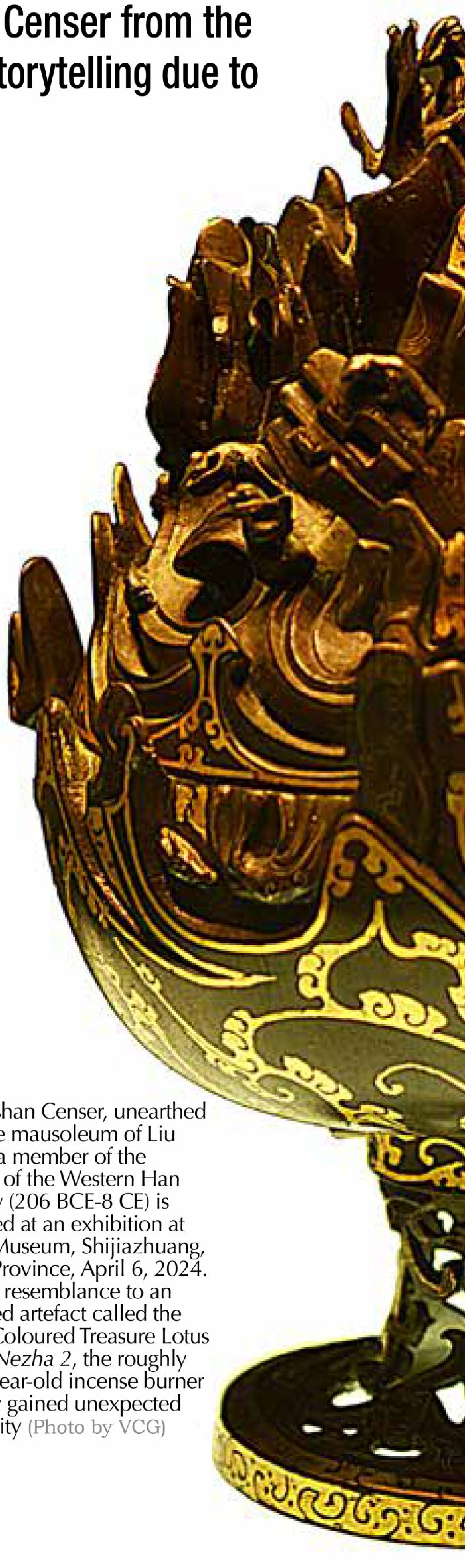
Accidental Discovery

In 1968, a small engineering unit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was conducting construction work near Mancheng, not far from Baoding in Hebei Province. After a mountain blasting operation, the unit discovered a soldier was missing, having fallen into a huge cave, which contained much more than a missing man.

The cave revealed bronze ware, jade artefacts, pottery and other ancient valuables – a veritable treasure trove. Experts from the Hebei Provincial Bureau of Cultural Relics made a secret inspection, and through inscriptions on the bronzes, they discovered it was a burial site of a king from the Zhongshan Kingdom over 2,000 years ago.

Historically, there were two Zhongshan Kingdoms. One was established by northern tribes during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE). However, the inscriptions on these bronzes were in Han clerical script, confirming that the artefacts were from a Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) tomb of the Zhongshan Kingdom.

Because the Han Dynasty was known for its lavish burial customs, tombs from that era were often filled with abundant burial goods. As a result, many Han tombs were looted long ago. In 1968, no Han tomb had been discovered in pristine condition. Moreover, the owner of this particular tomb was a



The Boshan Censer, unearthed from the mausoleum of Liu Sheng, a member of the nobility of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE-8 CE) is displayed at an exhibition at Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, April 6, 2024. With its resemblance to an animated artefact called the Seven-Coloured Treasure Lotus in film *Nezha 2*, the roughly 2,000-year-old incense burner recently gained unexpected popularity (Photo by VCG)

A screenshot of the "Seven-Coloured Treasure Lotus" depicted in the animation blockbuster *Nezha 2*

person of very high status. So how had it remained untouched?

The reason lies in its unique construction. Unlike other Han tombs, it was built into a mountain, making it a cliff tomb – a natural cave repurposed for burial. Among Han emperors, only Emperor Wen of Han, who died in 157 BCE, had a similar burial site.

It was hard to find the soldier who fell into the cave because it measured 6.8 metres from floor to ceiling, with an interior space resembling that of a grand ballroom. It held thousands of burial items, complete with a main chamber, passageways and side rooms to the north and south, resembling multiple rooms.

The discovery of such a high-status Han tomb was major news. The question arose: should such a high-profile Han tomb be excavated? Could it lead to more upheaval? This sensitive dilemma landed on the desk of premier Zhou Enlai.

Zhou consulted Guo Moruo, then president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, who recognised it as a significant archaeological opportunity. He decided to assemble a joint excavation team consisting of the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Hebei provincial archaeological team, and the PLA. The excavations proceeded in secret.

Progress was fast. Among the large number of bronze artefacts found, one piece bore an inscription saying "34th year," but with no other identifying date. It was hard to tell which king of Zhongshan it was. Based on historical records, there were 10 Zhongshan kings, but only the first, Liu Sheng, or the Jing King of Zhongshan, had a reign that was long enough at 42 years. They concluded that the tomb must have been his.

Liu Sheng was the half-brother of Emperor Wu of Han and was ennobled as the king of Zhongshan by their father Emperor Jing of Han. Historical records about him are sparse, but he is described as being "fond of wine and women."

He is said to have had over 120 sons, an astonishing number that is specifically noted in historian Ban Gu's *Book of Han* about 140 years after Liu Sheng died. While this may seem unbelievable, it is understandable given that Liu Sheng apparently spent much of his time drinking, indulging in pleasure and fathering children.

Liu Sheng is a familiar figure to many because of the later warlord Liu Bei (161-223). He claimed ancestry from Liu Sheng, eventually rising to become ruler of the Shu Kingdom during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280). With so many sons, Liu Bei's claim of being a descendant is hard to verify.

Politically, Liu Sheng was well aware of the delicacy of imperial power. To avoid being drawn into the power struggles of the court, he adopted a strategy of self-preservation, focusing his energy on enjoying life. Whenever officials tried to discuss court affairs with him, he would deflect the conversation with excuses.

However, Liu Sheng was not entirely without accomplishments. During his reign, he developed his fiefdom's economy, ensuring a relatively stable life for the people. The exquisite artefacts unearthed from his tomb reflect his luxurious lifestyle and pursuit of culture and the arts.

During the excavation, archaeologists meticulously cleaned every corner, careful not to overlook any important clues. A wealth of precious artefacts came to light, offering a much deeper understanding of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE-8 CE).

Exquisite Artefacts

Among these treasures, the Gilt Bronze Boshan Censer lay quietly in one of the burial chambers. It is a vivid reflection of the lifestyle and cultural tastes of Liu Sheng.

The tomb itself consists of two separate burial chambers belonging to Liu Sheng and his wife Dou Wan. Together, they yielded 10,633 artefacts, including over 4,000 exquisite pieces. The Boshan Censer, a heavyweight among these relics, stands alongside the Jade Burial Suit Sewn with Gold Thread and the Changxin Palace Lantern as highlights. They showcase the highly materialistic civilisation of the Western Han Dynasty's golden age and the creativity of its artisans.

The Boshan Censer is extraordinary, standing 26 centimetres tall and entirely cast in bronze. Its body is shaped

Top: The gate of the mausoleum of Liu Sheng, a ruler in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE-8 CE) in Mancheng County, Baoding, Hebei Province, February 14, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Middle: A tomb chamber of the mausoleum of Liu Sheng, in Mancheng County, Baoding, Hebei Province, April 12, 2017 (Photo by VCG)

Bottom: Gold Thread Jade Burial Suits, found in Han Dynasty ruler Liu Sheng's mausoleum, are displayed in Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, March 12, 2024 (Photo by VCG) like a *dou*, a type of ancient vessel, with a tall, pointed lid that mimics the legendary mythical mountain of Boshan – legendary sacred mountains in the sea where immortals were thought to live, which gives the censer its name.

The lid is adorned with undulating mountain peaks and swirling clouds, with wild animals running and playing among them. On close inspection, the details are strikingly lifelike: a small deer turns its head warily as if sensing danger, and a tiger flexes its claws, seemingly ready to pounce on its prey. These animal figures are rendered in both relief and full-round sculpture, creating a rich sense of depth and dimension.

What is even more remarkable is the intricate gold inlay. The gold threads are smooth and flowing, adding a mysterious and luxurious aura. The gold-inlaying technique was highly complex at the time. Artisans had to carve grooves into the surface of the object, embed gold threads into them, and then polish the surface to ensure the gold threads adhered perfectly.

The Boshan Censer was not merely decorative – it held profound cultural significance and was closely tied to the beliefs and daily lives of people. During the Han Dynasty, people sought immortality and yearned for the realm of the immortals. The Boshan Censer symbolised this sacred place. When incense was burned, the curling smoke rising through the mountain peaks seemed to carry people's prayers to the celestial realm, embodying the ancient longing for eternal life and a better existence.

It was also an essential object in the lives of the nobility as burning incense was considered a refined and elegant practice. Chinese literati have always spoken of the "Four Arts of Life" or "Four Gentlemen's Pastimes:" burning incense, tasting tea, hanging paintings and arranging flowers. Among these, burning incense ranked first. Whether in the imperial court or the mansions of the nobility, people enjoyed burning incense during other activities such as reading, playing instruments or hosting a banquet. The Boshan Censer not only released fragrant smoke to purify the air but also created an atmosphere of elegance and tranquility, showcasing the owner's status and taste.

From the moment it was unearthed, the Boshan Censer received meticulous care from archaeologists and cultural heritage conservators. To ensure its long-term preservation, experts employed advanced conservation techniques. After restoration and protective treatment, its surface was carefully maintained, and the intricate gold-inlaid patterns remain clear to this day.

Today, the Boshan Censer is one of Hebei Museum's most treasured artefacts. It is displayed in a case with controlled temperature, humidity and lighting. Every day, visitors from across the country come to admire its beauty and craftsmanship. The museum also regularly hosts exhibitions and events to introduce the history and cultural significance of the Boshan Censer.

The Gilt Bronze Boshan Censer, an artistic treasure that has travelled through time from the Western Han Dynasty, is not only an exquisite piece of craftsmanship but also a vivid historical textbook. It bears witness to the great civilisation of ancient China and carries the wisdom and emotions of its people. With the renewed interest sparked by *Nezha 2*, it has re-entered the public eye, inspiring a deeper fascination for cultural relics.★

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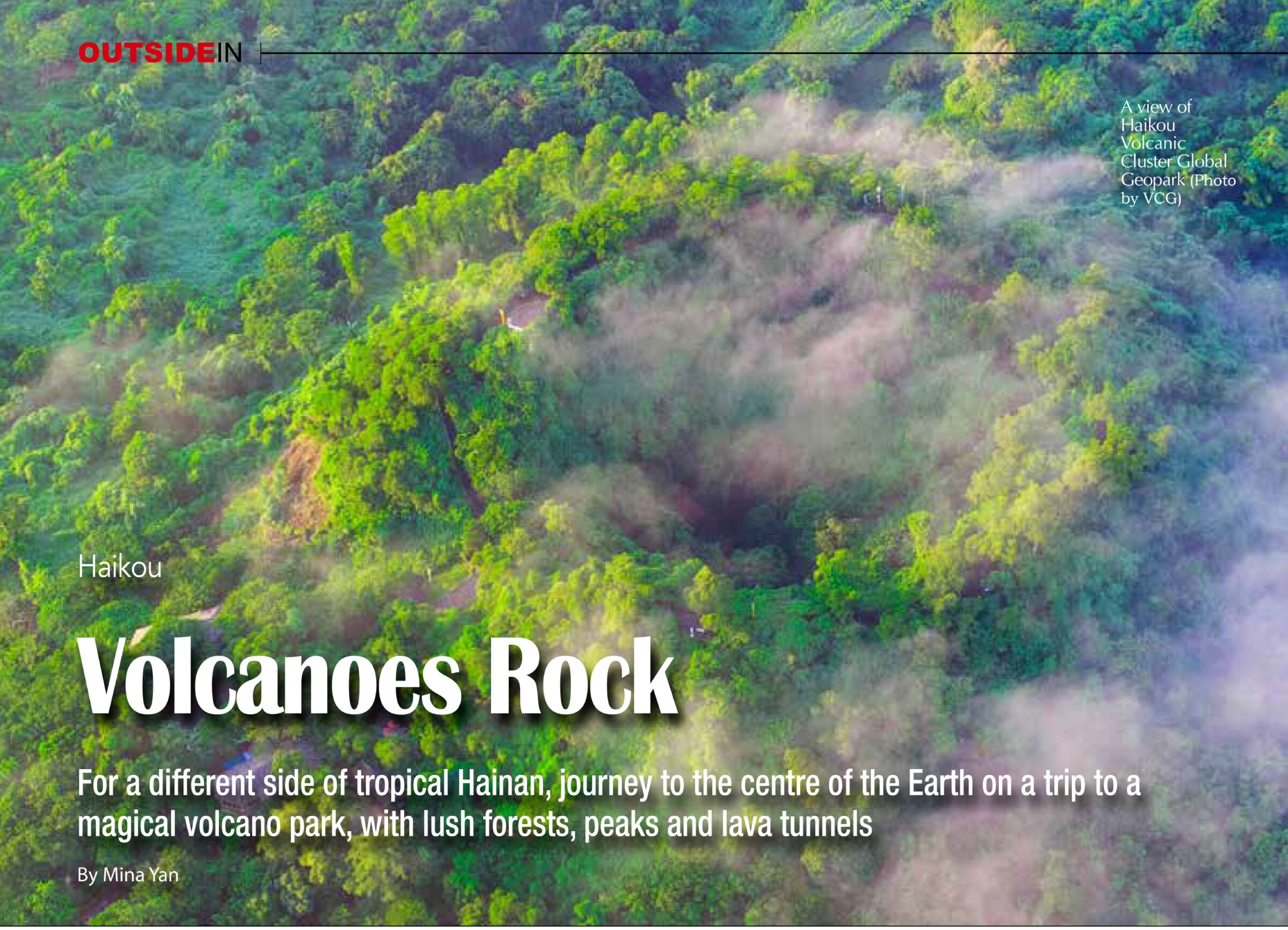


A view of Haikou Volcanic Cluster Global Geopark (Photo by VCG)

Haikou

Volcanoes Rock

For a different side of tropical Hainan, journey to the centre of the Earth on a trip to a magical volcano park, with lush forests, peaks and lava tunnels

By Mina Yan

When I moved to Haikou a few months ago, I didn't know much about the city. It was a work-related move, and it wasn't as if I had much choice in the matter. But, being the eternal optimist, I knew I needed to make the most of this chapter of my tropical adventure in Hainan – lovingly nicknamed China's very own Hawaii. And as a lover of nature and animals, it seems like this tropical island might just be the perfect place to explore my interests.

Arriving in Haikou in the middle of winter only to be met with warm weather and green trees all around was such a breath of fresh air. Then, something caught my eye on the way to town from the airport – a giant sign for Haikou Volcanic Cluster Global Geopark, also known as Shishan Volcano Cluster or simply Crater Park. What? I get to see a real extinct volcano!? This city is looking pretty good.

Located barely on the outskirts of the city, the drive to the base of this geological marvel was so short that it hardly felt like we even left the city. The locals recommend a trip to the park as one of the "must see" places in Haikou, and judgeing by the size and sheer convenience of their parking lot, the park knows it too. There's plenty of parking spaces as well as day-trip buses shuffling groups of visitors there on a daily basis. Unlike at many famous tourist spots in China now, there's no need for advanced booking online. You simply stroll up to the ticket counter like in the olden days and purchase your ticket right then and there. It's a small detail, but great for those like me who don't like sightseeing on a fixed schedule.

Even after years of being one of the top spots in Haikou, ticket prices are still reasonable. Adult tickets cost 54 yuan (US$7) per person, kids between 1.2-1.4 metres, seniors (from any country) between 60 -69 years old and students who are undergrad and below in a Chinese school are 27 yuan (US$4), and kids under 1.2 metres and seniors over 70 are free of charge.

Make Like *Moana*

Strolling into the park, the first thing you'll notice is how different the ground looks. Instead of finding stone or concrete, you see hole-filled volcanic rocks right beneath your feet. Kind of cool! Then, you're met with a more modern sight than you would expect from an extinct volcano. Like at many nature sites in China, there will be vendors selling everything from toys for kids to ice cream and snacks for hungry visitors. If you've got picky eaters, be sure to pack your own snacks because you won't be able to find healthy options here. It distracts from the natural beauty, but when you're hungry, they sure come in handy.

This park covers an area of about 108 square kilometres, and it takes at least half a day to fully explore it all. There are hiking trails of varying difficulty levels, allowing both casual walkers and more experienced hikers to enjoy the scenery. There are also picnic areas where families can relax and enjoy a meal and surrounded by nature.

This volcanic cluster here is the result of eruptions that occurred over 10,000 years ago. These eruptions left behind a landscape of volcanic cones, lava tunnels, and volcanic rock columns.

The most popular crater is the Ma Anling Crater. Covered in thick green vegetation, its bowl-shaped depression sits between two peaks, one of which is Fengluling Crater, where, if you hike to the top, you'll be able to see Haikou from its highest point. And if you happen to own a drone, this is the perfect place to let it fly for some unbelievable shots.

These circular craters, filled with lush greenery that can only be found year-round in a tropical climate like Hainan, create a breathtaking sight that reminds you of the Disney animated film *Moana*, where, over time, the fiery destructive force of a volcanic eruption turns into a beautiful green paradise like no other.

The lava flow conservation area of Haikou Volcanic Cluster Global Geopark (Photo by VCG)

CHINA
HAIKOU
HAINAN

If you want to get a real feel of the extinct volcano, you'll need to be ready to walk. The lower part of the mountain, although filled with plenty of extremely photogenic spots in its own right, is definitely more touristy and modern. What do I mean by modern?

Well, there are kids' craft activity stalls and candyfloss machines as well as man-made stone resting areas and a small museum that explains the history of this and many other extinct volcanoes around the world.

Lava Tunnels

But keep hiking, and you'll be met with one of the highlights of the park – the lava tunnels. These tunnels were formed when the outer part of the flowing lava cooled and solidified while the hotter lava continued to flow. As a result, hollow channels were left behind. Exploring these lava tunnels is like going on an adventure into the centre of the Earth. Inside, the walls are filled with unique lava formations, some resembling stalactites and stalagmites found in regular caves but with a distinct volcanic texture. The dim light, cool air and mysterious atmosphere add to the allure of these underground passages.

But this park isn't just for those who are interested in learning more about volcanoes. The park is a wonderland of geological marvels, local history and lush tropical scenery. It's a place where visitors can learn about the park's ecosystem, which has adapted to the nutrient-rich volcanic soil, creating a unique habitat for both flora and fauna. As you hike, if you look carefully, you'll even see some pretty cool animals, like tiny lizards that call the park home.

The volcano is also a huge part of the culture. The local people have lived in harmony with the volcanic environment for generations. Traditional villages built with basalt stones can be found within the park, and if you linger around for a bit, one of the many tour groups is bound to come by for you to eavesdrop in on an explanation.

Usually, when people plan their trip to Hainan, it's to the white sand beaches of Sanya. But Haikou, rich in history, is definitely worth a visit. There are not many places on the planet where you can explore a volcano and look into the centre of the Earth. It's home to a park that leaves visitors with memories and stories that will last for years to come.★

Practicalities

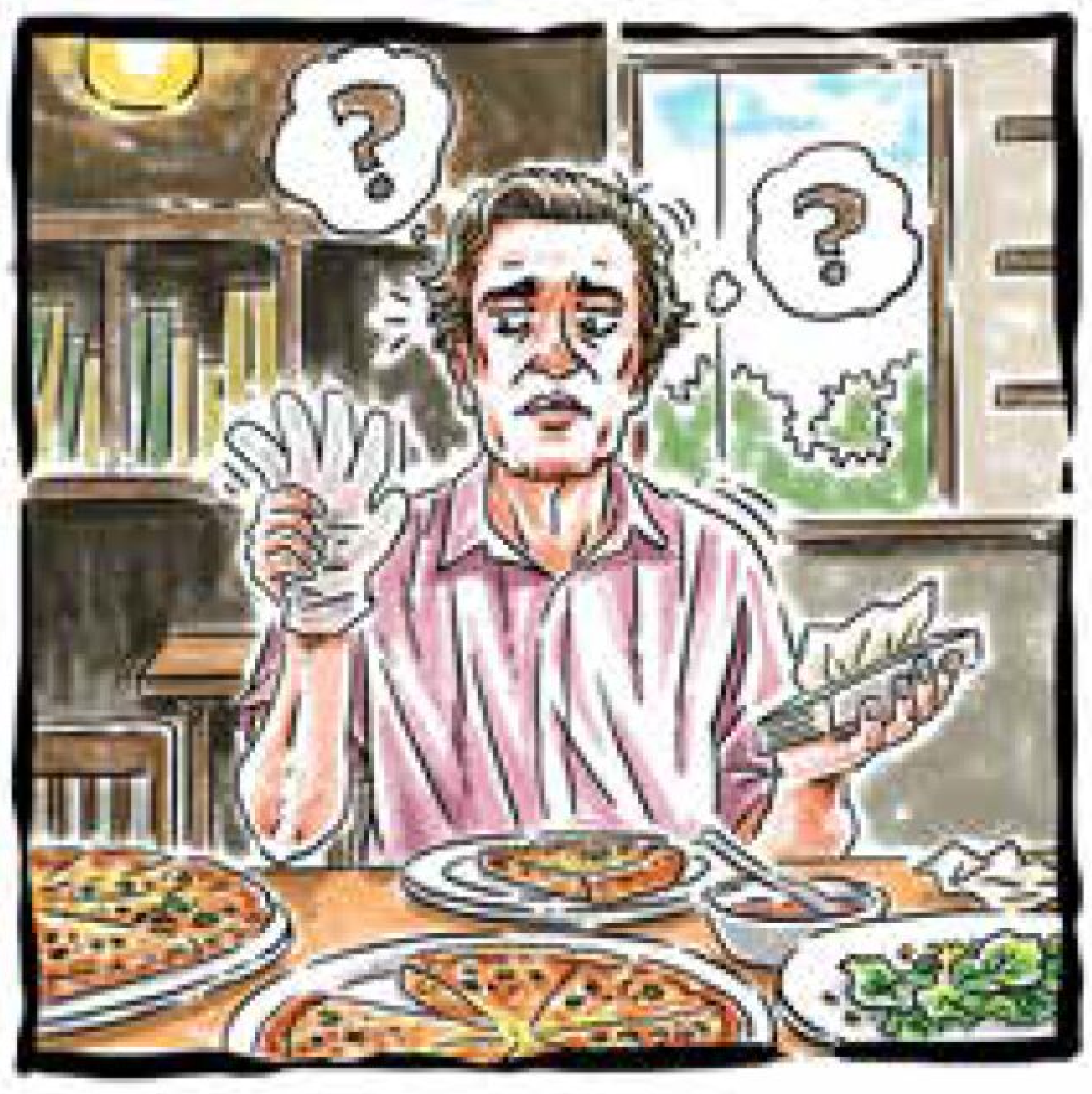
Haikou is well connected with domestic and international flights, and with provincial high-speed railways, as well as train services, via ferry, to the mainland. From Haikou, taxis and ride-shares can take you to the park in less than an hour.

Food for Thought

By Michael Jones

I originally moved to China in 2015 for a year or two. For many international residents in China, that opening sentence will sound very familiar. However, a decade later I continue to live in The Land of the Red Dragon, with no clear end to my residence in sight. This looming 10-year-anniversary has led me to reflect deeply on the wonderful benefits that life in China offers. It has also led me to ponder the subtle differences between life in the West and life here that continue to surprise me, even after living here for so long.

Some of the most fundamental differences between life in the West and in China are easier to become accustomed to than others. Classic examples include the very meals that start and end our day. In the world of breakfast many Westerners still struggle to adjust to China's simultaneously gelatinous and watery congee. However, who needs toast or cereal when you can indulge yourself with a stuffed steamed bun or a hot *youtiao* (like a churro). For Westerners who are accustomed to enjoying a light bowl of muesli for breakfast, the challenge in China is not how to find breakfast, it is how not to overindulge.



The same cannot be said for dessert. In the West dessert is sacred. Whether you prefer ice cream, lemon cheesecake, chocolate mousse or a tiramisu, everyone in the West has their favourite. For those who insist on eating fruit, it is usually served in the form of an Eton mess or summer pudding, just to ensure that even the health-conscious receive a sugar rush and an artery clogging dose of fat. That might explain why even after 10 years, the sight of a red bean soup at the end of a meal never fails to disappoint. Therefore, although life in China may feel healthier, visits home have become a competitive challenge in seeing exactly how many crème brûlées, Bakewell tarts and fudge brownies one person can eat on a single holiday.

One option to relieve the absence of cookies, muffins and apple pies in China would be to bake them at home. While this may sound very sensible, it raises another curious difference between our cultures, the mysterious case of the missing ovens. In the West it would be simply unthinkable to have a kitchen without an oven. In China having an oven is a luxury. As a result, Westerners in China need to adapt to a new life without freshly baked bread, warm oat flapjacks and cheesy pasta bakes.

On a rainy day, the absence of all those delicious carbs can be a source of home sickness. However, it would be wrong to think that China is a land without indulgence, indeed in many ways the opposite is true. Chinese culture has fully embraced the idea of treating oneself, including with formerly Western traditions such as birthday cakes. Anyone who has worked in a Chinese office will be familiar with the regular presence of gigantic, elaborate cakes arriving on the back of a delivery scooter. Without a doubt, China wins the Olympic gold medal in cake decoration. Every design, style, colour, and shape are available for custom creation and usually for a very affordable price.

However, slice into the cake and a curious difference emerges. Where Western birthday cakes are typically dense, often containing a rich, gooey, chocolate sponge, Chinese birthday cakes are usually exceedingly light and topped with a towering layer of fluffy synthetic cream.

Anyone who has worked in a Chinese office will be familiar with the regular presence of gigantic, elaborate cakes arriving on the back of a delivery scooter

While these differences essentially amount to little more than taste preferences, certain differences are a little more complicated. I still don't understand why I receive free plastic gloves whenever I order a pizza, burger or French fries in a restaurant, yet still get charged extra for an individually packaged napkin. Then there is the difference between the West's obsession with finishing food and drink, compared to China's leave it approach. While I might, eventually, learn to accept the idea of leaving food on your plate once you are full, I don't think I will ever be able to look at a table of half-full beer bottles without crying a little inside. Therefore, whether it's understanding the etiquette of how to spin a lazy Susan, or the benefits of warm water instead of iced, even after 10 years, there is always plenty more to learn.★

Warm Digital Hug

By Sam Duckett

Chinese platform RedNote has emerged as an alternative for US social media users, who have started calling themselves "TikTok refugees." This unprecedented migration to what was once a niche social media alcove has led to a groundbreaking discovery in the annals of sociology: folks can actually be nice to each other on the internet! I mean, who knew?

In a century from now, will our descendants tell tales of that fleeting moment of online harmony? Picture it: a bunch of newcomers shrugging off their digital baggage and launching into heartfelt "Hey, I'm new! Thanks for the warm welcome! Is there anything I should know?" vibes. And that's not all – the seasoned Chinese users have embraced this influx without sarcasm or "trolling," welcoming their new friends from across the sea.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's not a complete utopia. Some of the cultural exchanges are predictably shallow. I may have a mini-nervous breakdown if I see another post asking "Do Chinese people think I'm pretty/handsome?" But in the midst of these cringe-worthy inquiries, there's an overall pleasant tone in those cross-cultural chats. It's like a warm digital hug.

> It's like having too many guests show up at your house party – sure, they're fun, but you keep wondering if they're going to bring the house down

Interestingly, the only group feeling a tad unwelcoming since this trend started seems to be the foreign users already resident in China – the ones who were enjoying a *laowai*-free zone on RedNote. *Laowai* means foreigner in Chinese; it is a combination of the words *lao* (old) and *wai* (outside), which translates to "old outsider." These foreigners who are trying to shut the door on a new wave of online immigrants are known as *laonei*, or "old insider."

As a Chinese-speaking foreign user, or *laonei*, of RedNote, I totally get the vibe. It was our cosy little corner of calm amid the swirling tempest of Facebook fights and Twitter rambles. Now, with all these newcomers, it's like having too many guests show up at your house party – sure, they're fun, but you keep wondering if they're going to bring the house down.

This is a golden opportunity for the *laonei* to serve as bridge-builders while growing our own online following. It's a chance for Chinese-speaking foreigners in China to share insights that could have helped them when they first joined the app. The foreign community can create videos on "top trends on RedNote," fostering greater connection between the two communities.

Speaking of quiet corners, let's take a moment to give a round of applause to the development team at RedNote. Imagine sitting in your office, slurping noodles, when – BAM! – millions of new users pop up on your app. Did they panic? Nope! Within weeks, they rolled out a new translation feature that lets foreign users read posts written in Chinese. No more guessing what words mean – they can enjoy both the English and Chinese content with ease! Five years ago, who would have guessed that what was once a small app for fashion tips and online shopping is now a thriving hub of Sino-Anglo communication.

But here's the BIG question: Is this new influx of users good for the app? RedNote started as a platform for middle-class young ladies, and you know what happens when a bunch of pretty young girls flock to any platform – herds of young men come racing in right behind them, like puppies chasing a bouncing ball. This saw RedNote change into an all-purpose social media realm, a vibrant marketplace of ideas and tips for any problems that one might face in life. Whether I was applying for my new passport in Beijing or looking for a good steakhouse, RedNote always felt more like a personal helper than an entertainment zone.

Personally, I want RedNote to continue to be my go-to for foreign language learning and workout tips, not just another venue for viral cat videos. For the most part, more content is a blessing, but I only hope the useful content that made RedNote popular doesn't vanish into a digital void.

Ultimately, the RedNote phenomenon has gently nudged us to remember: we're more alike than some would have us believe. Watching Chinese and Americans bond over shared interests, defying geographical barriers because they love the same cat or dog video is a beautiful example of the potential of the internet. This whole saga has reminded me that the world doesn't have to be as toxic as X, ultimately giving this online cynic renewed faith in humanity.★

My Down-to-Earth Detox Secret: Dachazi

By Mina Yan

I've been on a detox cleanse for the past month, and it's been working so well that I've shed about 5 kilos so far and am feeling better than I have in years. By eliminating foods that are heavy in oil and spices, I've noticed that my palette has become accustomed to more bland flavour profiles and the authentic flavours of ingredients without the use of heavy seasonings. So, has it been a month of boiled chicken breasts? Heck no!

Chinese cuisine has some incredibly healthy options that are hearty and tasty. One of my childhood favourite breakfast dishes has been making steady appearances during my mealtimes this past month – northeastern Chinese *dachazi*. Growing up, this was my epitome of a country-style dish. It's never found in fancy restaurants or at important meals. It's a peasant's breakfast that was cheap to make and filled you up for hours.

Dachazi is a one-pot wonder that typically uses a combination of ingredients that are native to Dongbei, the term for Northwest China. The main ingredient is corn, namely the sweet corn you find in supermarkets. Dongbei is renowned for producing glutinous corn. This corn tend to produce bigger, rounder kernels than sweet corn and has a stickier, waxy texture. I know, it isn't that cool, but it has a much chewier texture and richer flavour that I simply can't get enough of.

So why was it such a hit during my month-long detox? Well, great taste aside, *dachazi* is incredibly healthy. The body digests and absorbs glutinous corn much more slowly than sweet corn, which makes it great for anyone trying to control their cholesterol and blood pressure. It's also incredibly rich in dietary fibre and helps give your intestinal peristalsis (the smooth muscles in your intestinal wall) a pick-me-up boost, all great for flushing out unhealthy indulgences.

There are a few variations of *dachazi*, but the most authentic one only requires two ingredients – glutinous rice kernels and red beans. Preparing a big bowl of *dachazi* is ridiculously easy. It's cooked similarly to congee, but since your ingredients are hearty grains, it takes time to soak everything in advance, which means prep usually starts the night before.

Dachazi is so distinctly northeastern Chinese that you'll have an extremely hard time finding it anywhere else. And even if you do happen to come across it, you can bet that it'll be on the menu of a restaurant serving northeastern cuisine.

Everything about this dish reminds me of my childhood. In Dongbei, the locals speak with a strong, rustic accent. And while people from other parts of China often joke about how it sounds crude, Dongbei people embrace it as a symbol of their straightforward and warm-hearted nature. The accent and this dish are so culturally intertwined that the Dongbei accent is sometimes called the *dachazi* accent.

In China, Dongbei cuisine is often seen as hearty and unpretentious – famous for the larger-than-necessary portions and home-cooking style presentation. *Dachazi* perfectly captures Dongbei people's history and personality – from generations of hard-working people needing to fill their bellies with a cheap bowl of hearty porridge to the "no need for pleasantries, let's just cut to the chase" attitude, *dachazi* is the comfort food of the people.★

REALCHINESE

rén jī

人机

renji

machine-like person

As AI technology advances rapidly, concerns are growing about whether humans will eventually be replaced by machines. Optimists argue that human beings possess unique qualities and we should not make ourselves *renji*, or "machine-like people."

The term comes from *ren* (meaning "human") and *ji* ("machine"). Originally, it was used in online gaming to refer to AI-controlled characters, such as NPCs (non-player characters), designed to play alongside real players or help them hone their skills. The term later evolved into an insult for human players who are slow and unskilled in battle – those who fail to cooperate with teammates and are often the first to be killed off.

When AI increasingly integrated into daily life, *renji* has taken on broader meaning, describing those who appear emotionally detached. They work, study and go through life much like everyone else, but they exhibit little emotional reaction to their surroundings.

They don't laugh at jokes, rarely get angry when insulted, remain unmoved by fiction, and often avoid social interaction. To them, this emotional approach is a way to maintain composure in an era of mounting pressure and fierce competition. Some even speculate that the future evolution of intelligent beings may not require emotions at all.

Critics, however, argued that emotion is the defining feature that distinguishes humans from machines. Without it, a vibrant world could fade into a cold, colourless warehouse for automatons.★

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